



She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

NOVEL

3

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The shelves were stacked high and covered in thick vegetation. Huge aquariums took up the space between them.

"It's like we're lost deep in the ocean."

She Professed Herself Pupil^{of the} Wise Man



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Seven Seas Entertainment



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Kenja no deshi wo nanoru kenja 3
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digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-449-7
Printed in Canada
First Printing: February 2022
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1

MIRA'S CARRIAGE rumbled along the gently curving road that cut through the verdant forest between Karanak and Lunatic Lake. With no further business in the City of Requiem, she and Garrett were on their way back to the royal capital.

She looked out the window, taking in the scenery as they traveled. The trees off to the left of the road were much sparser than those to the right, and a riot of colorful wildflowers bloomed in the sunlight.

Just off the roadside ahead, a group of adventurers were engaged in battle against a small pack of monsters—not an uncommon scene in this part of the world. With a steady hand on the reins, Garrett directed the carriage to the far shoulder to give them some extra space.

But just as they were about to pass, a magic circle appeared in the roadway and a raccoon-looking creature sprang up before them. Garrett had neither room nor time to react.

“Oh...!”

An instant later, Mira heard a cry of pain and felt the carriage wheels thump over something. The creature promptly vanished back into the magic circle.

“What the hell was that?!” she yelled as she turned to look at the driver's seat, then the path behind them, praying that she wouldn't see a body lying in the road.

Nothing was there.

She heaved a sigh of relief before remembering that whatever it was it had sounded fairly substantial. Had it been sent flying? She widened her search as she scanned the roadside, looking out into the forest meadow.

Nothing.

The gentle curve of the road stretched off into the distance in both directions. A field of grass swayed in the breeze as the group of adventurers fought. A mountain range towered above, the forest covering its steep slopes until the

trees gave way to sheer rock. Wisps of clouds wreathed its peaks under a rich blue sky.

There was no sign of any accident. In fact, the only thing out of the ordinary was that one of the adventurers—a female mage—was looking at their coach with a slightly dazed expression.

“See, I told you,” sighed the male mage casting beside her, giving her shoulder an encouraging pat. “Summoning is a waste of mana. Just stick to providing support with your ethereal spells.”

“I guess so...” The summoner—presumably—slumped in dejection, and her eyes reflected the flames of his spells as they destroyed the monsters.

But above the roar of the flames and the cries of the monsters, someone bellowed, “Did he just say that *summoning*...is a *waste*?!”

That someone was Mira.

“Unforgivable!” she shouted as she leapt from the coach, not about to stand by when the art of summoning had been so casually insulted.

Unfortunately, her plan to give a spontaneous demonstration on the power of practical summoning was cut short. Clearly skilled, the adventuring party finished off the last monsters in an eruption of flame as she stalked toward them. Mira was left simmering with indignation that had no outlet as she stood between the two mages.

“I-It came out of nowhere and I couldn’t avoid it. Terribly sorry,” said Garrett, hustling to catch up and address the small group. The vice commander bowed, and the male mage stepped forward to return the gesture.

“Oh, no, the fault is ours. She’s not the best at affixing the summoning point. I told her this might happen.” As he spoke, he nudged the female summoner standing beside him.

“My apologies...” She sounded utterly miserable.

Mira had no time for this song and dance. “So you *are* a summoner, then?!”

“Well, I... Yes,” the woman replied with a small nod. Considering that she was practicing the least popular school of magic, she was used to chilly reactions

and had grown accustomed to feeling inferior.

“I see, I see. A summoner. That’s wonderful!” Mira exclaimed, her face breaking into an unexpected grin.

“I-Is it?” A small smile worked its way onto the woman’s face.

“Well, of course it is! So...you’re having issues affixing your summoning points, eh? Hrmm, I had the same problem way back when. But I’ve got just the trick for that!” As she prattled on, Mira summoned a Dark Knight right next to the woman as if to show how it was done. An aura of bloodlust radiated from the animated armor, and the blackness of its great two-handed sword reflected only terror and despair.

“Where did that...?!” someone shouted.

The knight’s appearance was so sudden, the adventurers didn’t realize a spell had even been cast. In a panic, they readied themselves for battle as the knight stood motionless and stared down at the novice summoner with blood-red eyes.

“Get back!” the male mage yelled.

But the woman didn’t move a muscle. She just stared back, wide-eyed.

“This is an armor spirit, isn’t it?” she asked with a slight lilt in her voice. This spirit was an order of magnitude more terrifying than the Dark Knights she could summon. “Which means that you’re also...”

“Hrmm, yes.” Mira smirked. “I’m a summoner too!”

A murmur rippled through the group.

“Amazing. I’ve never seen a Dark Knight this powerful before,” the novice summoner said in envy before turning to Mira.

“I bet you haven’t!” Mira exclaimed, thinking, *Finally! Someone who recognizes summons at first sight!*

Then another shout of alarm went up as a massive paladin appeared from nowhere. The newcomer was clad in pure-white armor and carrying a giant tower shield. Instead of terror, the Holy Knight radiated an aura of protection as it turned its glowing red eyes upon the novice. It seemed to have stepped

straight out of some legend.

“That’s a Holy Knight, right? I’ve never seen armor spirits this strong. And you summoned them with such accuracy! Amazing!” The excitement in the woman’s voice built as she stared at the white knight.

“With my trick for affixing summoning points, you’ll be able to do it too,” Mira said, basking in the praise as she traced her chin with a finger.

“Really? I’ll really be able to do it like that?” the novice summoner asked, half doubting, but an edge of hope crept into her voice.

As the Elder of the Tower of Evocation, Mira couldn’t abandon one of her own. Staring straight into the woman’s eyes, she nodded decisively.

“Hrmm, it’s simple. Let me show you how it’s done.”

While the other adventurers picked through the spoils of battle, Mira carefully and thoroughly shared her wisdom—even more than when she’d led lessons back at the Silver Towers. Five minutes came and went.

“Like placing a pebble and...”

After being instructed by Mira on the finer points of preparation and visualization techniques, the novice looked down at the circle drawn in the middle of the road and cast her spell. A magic circle appeared, overlapping the drawn circle, and a small raccoon-like creature popped out from the center. The novice threw her hands up in glee as her carbuncle appeared at the exact point she’d specified.

“I did it... I did it!” With tears in her eyes, she scooped Mira up in a hug.

“Hrmm, well done.” Momentarily distracted by the sweet feminine scent mixed with a slight twinge of sweat, Mira regained her composure and offered more praise. “You’re a fast study. You’ll make a splendid summoner!”

And as Danblf, one of the Nine Wise Men and Elder of the Tower of Evocation, she was the most qualified person to make that statement.

“I’ll do my best!” The novice summoner squeezed tighter, overjoyed at the flattery.

Suddenly, a gust of wind blew through the meadow, followed immediately by

a black cat, which sprang from the bushes to dash across to the woods on the far side.

“What was that? Another monster?” one of the adventurers asked as he readied his sword.

“No, a wind spirit,” said the novice, peering toward the tree line. “And I think it was being chased.”

“Hrmm, chased by a cat, it would seem,” Mira muttered, hand on her chin as she dug back into her memories. There was a type of monster called an elemental eater, but they had demon-like horns and a monstrous appearance... nothing that could be mistaken for a cat.

The trees rustled, and the wind spirit cut across the field once more. Without hesitating, Mira bolted forward to catch the following cat and cradled it to her chest.

“What have we here...?”

It was quite a bit lighter than it appeared—in fact, it didn’t feel like physical weight at all. And yet the way it looked up at her face and meowed pleasantly was completely normal cat behavior.

“Huh? That cat is full of strange magic,” the sorcerer said, intrigued. He stared at the cat cuddled to Mira’s chest. *Oho, is that so?* Mira looked back down at the cat. There was a simple player action that revealed simple information about a subject.

“Well, now...it’s a shikigami,” she muttered, as the words *Shikigami: Meowmaru* floated above the cat. It mewed softly and gently pawed at her. It was absolutely adorable. She stopped herself from cooing over the animal as she realized the eyes of the adventurers were still on her.

Shikigami were normally the familiars of mediums, those who practiced the school of divination. They came in countless shapes and forms, from simple animals like cats to all sorts of imaginary creatures.

“Hrmm, there’s still something off about it...”

“Um...?”

The sound of a female voice fluttering on the wind caught Mira's ear as she rubbed the cat's belly. Suddenly, the shikigami cried out and squirmed free of her hands before dashing behind her. Her plan to recapture the familiar was cut short when she realized the wind spirit was standing nearby.

"Wh-what were you going to do with Mr. Cat?!" the spirit demanded with a concerned expression, peeking out from behind a tree at the edge of the road. In her arms, she held Meowmaru protectively.

Hadn't the cat just been chasing the spirit? Now it seemed they were quite good friends.

"Ah... No particular intentions," Mira said, trying to make sense of the situation.

The spirit's face dropped. "Then...then...y-you're here to get me, aren't you?!" she shouted as the air began to hum. A small vortex whipped up around them.

"What? What's going on?" cried the swordsman, readying his blade.

"This wind isn't natural!" The knight gripped his shield tightly and prepared to defend.

Warrior classes weren't able to commune with spirits, but the whirlwind suddenly appearing around them was unmissable.

The sorcerer sighed as he explained the situation. "There's a wind spirit over there. We told her we had no ill intentions regarding the cat, so now she thinks that we're after her. Not sure why."

"So what do we do?"

"Let's all calm down," Mira said. She knew that spirits were usually benevolent toward humans and could be reasoned with. "I only caught Meowmaru because I thought he was chasing after you. That's it." Her gaze flickered to the cat.

"Meowmaru?" the spirit echoed, tilting her head in puzzlement.

"The name of that shikigami. You weren't aware?"

The wind spirit stared incredulously at her. Mira tried to explain the situation as they had seen it. To them, it looked like that cat had been chasing after the

spirit. She'd only picked it up in an attempt to help. That was when she discovered that the cat was in fact a shikigami named Meowmaru. As Mira's explanation progressed, the force of the whirlwind lessened.

"Ohhh... Ah. Um, I'm sorry." The spirit apologized, still holding Meowmaru in her arms.

"No, no... We misread the situation. Sorry we butted in like that."

The pair smiled at each other in relief, and the spirit told Mira that she had only been playing tag with Meowmaru. The adventurers relaxed and laughed as the tension drained away.

"So Mr. Cat—or Meowmaru, I suppose—you're a shikigami?" The wind spirit looked down at Meowmaru, who stared back in return.

"Meow."

"I don't suppose you know who Meowmaru there belongs to, do you?" Mira asked.

"No, we first met when I was being attacked by the scary people." Her fear was apparent, but then her eyes lit up. "Meowmaru saved me from danger, though I don't think there were any mediums in the area at the time. We've played together ever since, but I haven't met his medium yet."

"Hrm, with no mage in the picture, it could be that Meowmaru is an autonomous shikigami," Mira surmised, taking in the particulars of the spirit's story.

Shikigami had two main types: the *responsive*, which were directly controlled by their mages, and the *autonomous*, which acted of their own free will.

Something didn't add up here. "You said you were attacked? Are you sure they were people?"

Humanity and nature spirits lived in harmony. Furthermore, as their name implied, nature spirits could control the natural powers of the world. It would take someone immensely powerful to stand against them.

"Yes. I was basking in the moonlight beside a lake when I was suddenly surrounded by fierce-looking humans bearing weapons. I fled through the

woods, and then Meowmaru jumped out and chased them all away.” As the spirit spoke, various emotions fought for control of her expression.

“Attacking a spirit is an unthinkable offense!” the novice summoner cut in.

“Hrmm, indeed it is.”

They both understood the importance of the bond between the spirits and humanity. Even the warriors in the group knew that much.

Unlike monsters, nature spirits weren’t aggressive—on the contrary, they were known to grant boons and lend aid when needed. They didn’t even drop loot. Whoever attacked a spirit would earn only the wrath of nature and the label of sinner throughout the three great kingdoms.

But that was back when the world was a game. Perhaps something had changed when the world became reality. Perhaps there was now something to be gained by turning on a trusted neighbor. As Mira pondered, she found herself disgusted by the possible depths of human greed.

“I’m very grateful for Meowmaru,” the wind spirit murmured. “I heard that some of my other friends have been attacked and abducted.”

“Wait, you’re saying there are more people out there attacking spirits?”

“So it seems. But I had Meowmaru to protect me...” The spirit squeezed the cat tightly in her trembling arms as her face showed a mix of worry and grief.

If it’s happening in multiple locations, it could be the work of villains who hunt spirits for a living, Mira speculated. She had no knowledge of any way spirits might bring about wealth, or who might be in the market for them. Many spirits, like the wind spirit before them, were quite beautiful. It could be that they were captured with the purpose of being ornaments or pets. Perhaps someone was looking to convert their power into military might.

But spirits had no mercy for those who would do them harm. They were powerful enough to destroy a small village single-handedly if angered. Yet, if the spirit was to be believed, it seemed like someone had found a way to capture them. If these kidnappers knew they were facing a spirit and still chose to attack, it meant they were supremely confident in their capabilities.

Thirty years had passed since the game became reality, and new techniques had surely been developed. Mira had seen new wonders with her own eyes such as the Accord Cannon, a masterpiece of technomancy. Progress marched ever onward, great and terrible in equal measure—so it was *possible* that someone had found a way to subdue spirits.

But how was it possible that a cat was scary enough to drive those people off?

I don't have enough information... No matter how much she mulled it over, she couldn't reach a definitive conclusion. This was a matter to bring up with Solomon and Luminaria. If there were organized foes who could capture spirits, perhaps they knew something about the matter.

She sighed heavily and abandoned that train of thought. Best to turn her attention back to the immediate.

“So you have friends besides Meowmaru?” she asked the spirit, an impish smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“Of course I do!” The spirit exclaimed and began to pout.

“Hrmm... Meowmaru...” Mira murmured. The cat's name elicited certain memories. Perhaps this wasn't an autonomous shikigami after all. In that case, considering the creature had triumphed over whatever was hunting spirits, its master must be terribly powerful indeed.

A name floated to the surface of her memory...Kagura the Seven Stars, Elder of the Tower of Divination. The school of divination made use of numerous techniques utilizing shikigami, the most versatile of which were the Four Guardians: Suzaku the phoenix, Genbu the tortoise, Seiryuu the dragon, and Byakko the tiger could be called upon by only the strongest mediums. Once a shikigami was mastered, they could be named. Kagura herself had renamed all four: Tweetsuke, Kushellge, Henryu, and Growlta. And a name like Meowmaru fit right in. Kagura had scores of shikigami, and all of them had silly names.

It couldn't be...

It had to be a coincidence. Surely there had to be someone else out there with the same strange sense of humor.

Whoever they were, they were powerful. And if they were a medium, perhaps

they might have heard a rumor regarding Kagura's whereabouts. It was all conjecture, but it was the first lead Mira had found since her mission to locate Soul Howl had ended unsuccessfully. She carefully stored the information in the corner of her mind.

Any clue was better than no clue.

Chapter 2

“TAKE CARE.” Mira waved as the spirit prepared to leave.

The novice summoner looked on, clearly worried. “Please do be careful, dear spirit.”

“Of course. Thank you.” The wind spirit took Meowmaru’s paw and waved it back as well.

The cat was docile when wrapped in the spirit’s arms. Perhaps its mission was to continue serving as the wind spirit’s guardian. Though the identity of the attackers was still a mystery, they probably weren’t the sort to let one failed attempt be their last.

Perhaps Meowmaru’s master had summoned an autonomous shikigami to protect the wind spirit. Or perhaps the mysterious medium was using the spirit as bait to expose the hunters. Mira continued to mull over the possibilities. Despite her worries, the combined power of a wind spirit and a magic cat would not easily be overcome.

So much going on in this world of ours.

The noonday sun shone brightly as the spirit and Meowmaru disappeared back into the woods.

Mira turned to the novice summoner. “Well, then, good luck,” she said, preparing to return to her carriage.

“Um, pardon me, miss. I’m Aimee. May I ask your name?”

“I’m Mira. Aimee, is it? Keep up the good work.” Mira looked back with a serene smile more at home on the face of an elderly man than a young lady, then climbed into the carriage.

“We’ll be taking our leave,” said Garrett. “Farewell.” He bowed before stepping up to the driver’s seat. He gathered the reins and the carriage set off slowly on its way, with the sound of rattling wheels and hoofbeats echoing after it.

The carbuncle squealed and jumped into Aimee’s arms, trembling.

Mira and Garrett disappeared around the bend, leaving behind a slightly puzzled group of adventurers and one traumatized carbuncle.

With no further encounters of note, the pair made their way home, arriving at Lunatic Lake around noon the following day.

Mira anxiously entered the palace and was led to Solomon's office by a maidservant. For a brief moment, she worried that she was walking into an ambush. The maids would capture her and turn her into a dress-up doll...again. But she soon found herself at Solomon's office, unabducted.

When the maid knocked on the door, Solomon beckoned them in, so she opened it right away. The king thanked and dismissed her, and she quietly closed the door behind the very relieved Mira.

With no one else in the office, Solomon dropped all pretext of formality as he tossed a handful of papers onto his desk. "Welcome back. It's been almost a week. Did you find him?"

"Nope. He wasn't there. But I did find clues that might lead us to him." Mira opened her Item Box and pulled out some of the documents that she'd found within the Ancient Temple.

Clearing some space on his cluttered desktop, Solomon began leafing through them.

"Rules governing phoenix rebirth? How to cremate an immortal? Locations of the spirits of the seasons? What in the world is he planning?"

"I think this might hold the answer," Mira said as she handed over another document. Solomon's brow furrowed deeper.

It was a list of restorative items and notes on their effectiveness against the seal known as the Demon's Blessing. They ranged from common items to high-end panaceas, and almost all were listed as ineffective. The only item on the list that didn't have an effect recorded was Holy Grail of Heavenly Light.

"Is he searching for the Grail?" Solomon asked in disbelief.

"Hrmm, that's what it looks like." Mira nodded and then started to tell him

what she'd seen within the castle on the sixth level of the Ancient Temple Nebrapolis.

"She must be important to him."

"Seems that way."

The pair fell silent as they reminisced and worried about their old friend, Soul Howl. Whatever had caused his change of heart, it seemed clear that he was now traveling on a quest for the Grail.

"And if he wasn't in the castle, we can assume that he's chasing another clue," mused Solomon. "If we want to find him, we'll have to follow in his footsteps and go through these notes to unlock whatever secret of the Grail he discovered."

"Well, yes, I suppose," she muttered. As soon as they knew where he was headed, they—that is, *Mira*—would need to set off after him.

The two turned back to the mountain of papers with visible disgust.

"But it's definitely going to take a lot of work to go through all of this. Thankfully, I know just the person to call." Reaching over, Solomon rang the bell on his desk twice. It hung from a small frame and looked like a miniature version of a church tower bell, but it emitted no sound.

"Was that supposed to do something? I didn't hear anything."

"Hm? Oh, it's a Calling Bell. A useful tool. Only the person you intend to summon can hear it. The range is a kilometer or so, and the person I was calling is..."

"King Solomon, you summoned me?" a familiar male voice echoed through the office door.

"Indeed! I have a small request. Please come in," said Solomon, switching back to his royal persona.

"At your service," said Suleiman, sketching a bow as he entered. The blond-haired elf wore a tastefully subdued outfit.

As she caught sight of him, Mira remembered just what it was he specialized in—knowledge of ancient history and spirits. Knowledge was largely intangible,

yet it was as valuable as any artifact. It could only be stored for as long as the brain allowed and could only be gained by learning from someone or reading it from a book. The breadth of knowledge was so vast that no one person could hope to know it all...but that didn't stop Suleiman from trying.

He noticed Mira's presence and offered her a formal bow as well. "Welcome back, Lady Mira. Did you make any progress?"

"Hrmm, I think I found a lead at least." She smirked and looked toward the desk. Following her gaze, he took note of the pile of papers and immediately understood the cause for his summoning.

"So I see. Your lead appears to be...comprehensive."

"From the look of it, it will require someone with knowledge of both spirits and ancient times, and you were the first person who came to mind," Solomon said as he placed a silver key atop the pile. "I would like to know what information can be deciphered from these documents. You are hereby officially granted access to the A-Rank archives of the grand library."

Alongside his vast knowledge, Suleiman had shown great talent for organizing and deciphering information over the past thirty years. His combat skills were abysmal, but none were his equal when it came to paperwork. It also helped that he was loyal to a fault.

"Understood. I shall devote my knowledge to your cause, Your Majesty." He bowed deeply, then carefully tucked the key into his breast pocket. Ingratiated by the need for his knowledge, he loaded the materials onto a small library cart before turning to the pair once more.

"I will be in the stacks if you need anything," he said and then set off with great enthusiasm.

A satisfied smirk stole its way across Solomon's face as he watched Suleiman leave. "All we have to do now is wait."

"Truly, you are a master of delegation."

"It's just finding the right person for the right task. That's all there is to this job."

Mira laughed at the characteristic response before throwing herself down on the sofa. As she twisted around in search of comfort, she opened her Item Box to grab an apple au lait and noticed the demon's horns.

"Ah, right. Mind if I give you one more problem to delegate?" asked Mira as she burrowed into the cushions.

"Sure, why not? What is it?" Solomon replied as he idly rearranged the papers he'd pushed to the corner of his desk.

"Well, you see... I ran into a demon on the bottom floor of the catacombs."

"A demon?!" Solomon's face drew tight.

"Yep. Came out of nowhere. A third-rank Earl. It attacked me. It lost. But why it was there in the first place is a mystery."

"Well, that certainly is strange."

After a brief pause, Solomon returned the papers to the corner of his desk and reached into a drawer to pull out a sealed file. Mira wandered over and looked down curiously at the file as he opened it.

"I'm not sure what stories you've been told about the Defense of the Three Great Kingdoms, but the demons were believed to have been completely eradicated during that war. That was ten years ago."

"Hrmm, I'd heard something to that effect."

"But the truth—as you've seen yourself—is that a few remain. They're hiding away here and there, plotting and scheming. This file is all we know, a collection of sightings and traces." As he spoke, he pulled some papers from the file and laid them out. All were marked top secret.

"Hrmm, classified, huh?"

"The public thinks they're gone for good. That they're still alive is a fact known only to the upper levels of the government and the Union."

Solomon's words and manner spoke to the severity of the situation and Mira's mind flashed back to Emella and the other adventurers she'd met while in Karanak, City of Requiem.

“Really, now? Guess I should have been more tight-lipped about it...”

“You—?! You *told* someone?!” Solomon’s head snapped up as he looked at Mira, who was still looking over the documents on the table. She looked back at him, thinking to herself that the panicked look rarely graced his kingly countenance.

“Not like that! It was just the other adventurers I was with when we ran into the demon.”

Trying to soothe him, she explained what had happened in Karanak, with young Tact, Emella, and the rest of the party. She told Solomon about finding the Mirror of Darkness, not finding Soul Howl on the sixth level, and the demon appearing as they went to leave.

After hearing the full story, Solomon nodded and stood.

“All right, I suppose that makes some sense. I’ll take care of this. You said the guild was Écarlate Carillon and the boy’s name was Tact, correct?”

“Hrmm, that’s right. I was with Emella, Asval, Flicker, and Zef. Oh, and their captain, Cyril.”

“Got it. I’ll contact the Union over there to sort things out. Wait here for a moment.”

He left the office and headed for the communications room. With the absence of in-game chat channels to facilitate long-range communication, Solomon’s technomancers had created a device that allowed for two-way communication across vast distances.

Alone in the office, Mira snagged one of the papers from the desk and sat down as her eyes skimmed across the page.

The first reported sighting had come from a forested region in the mountains on the western side of the continent. It stated that a black horned figure had been seen atop a cliff spying on a group of knights while they were training. It disappeared when sighted and had been far enough away that they couldn’t confirm whether it was actually a demon.

She glanced over the other reports, but none seemed very credible.

Bored with the documents, Mira passed the time gazing out the wide office windows at the surrounding scenery.

Quite the view from up here.

Spread out below was a panorama of the crescent-shaped lake that was the city's namesake. The capital had sprung up around the shore, and Mira's vantage point offered her a great view of the vibrant and bustling city. But as the palace was the center of the city, she could only see the half that lay across the shimmering surface of the water. Letting out a sigh of admiration, she focused on the most prominent facility before her—Alcail Academy.

It's bigger than the university I went to.

Students from across the continent gathered to study on its sprawling campus. Her brows creased as she thought back to her own university experience filled with first meetings and final partings.

Alcail Academy took up nearly a tenth of the city's real estate. It was centered around three massive school buildings and was second only to the palace in size. The school was divided among beginning, advanced, and specialized departments of study. As befitting the character of the Kingdom of Alcail, many of the departments were dedicated to teaching the magical arts, and popular opinion held that it was the best school of magic on the continent.

Anyone and everyone hoping to be a mage yearned to attend the academy. Nearby residences had become makeshift dormitories for the growing student population.

It was also one part of Solomon's Five Elements, a grand urban development plan he had devised for the city when the game had become reality.

As Mira stared out at the academy, packed with the hopes and desires of its students, Tact's carefree smile rose unbidden in her mind.

I wonder if Tact goes to school in Karanak? He had adored her. Surely, he'd put the effort in to be a fine mage someday.

Her musing was cut short as Solomon returned to his office.

"How'd it go?" Mira asked, turning from the window as Solomon fell back into

his chair.

“I think it’ll be fine,” he replied, letting his expression relax. “I spoke with the Union leader over there, and he said there were only a couple rumors about demons floating around.”

“Hrmm, makes sense. They didn’t seem like the type to gossip.” She smiled as she thought about her newfound friends.

As veteran adventurers, Emella and the rest of the party would be well aware of the power such information could hold. And from what she’d gleaned from her conversations with Cyril, their captain and a former player, she didn’t think he’d go out of his way to cause chaos.

“Well, with that in mind, it might be best if you also keep quiet about all this. Rumors are one thing...but someone fighting, surviving, and defeating a demon is pretty darn conclusive,” Solomon reminded her as he leaned back in his chair.

“Got it. Though from the look of things, I’m guessing you also don’t know what a demon might have been doing down there?”

“Nope. I’m not certain, anyway. I should probably send a survey team down to the sixth level of the catacombs to see if it left any clues. I wonder what it was up to in a place like that?”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

Everything she’d brought back from the Ancient Temple had been related to Soul Howl, one of the Nine Wise Men. After she defeated the demon, they got out of the dungeon as fast as they could. There was a chance that a formal investigation might turn up something they’d missed.

Leaving the window, Mira flopped back down on the sofa and stretched.

“By the way, that new robe looks like just your old one,” Solomon remarked, giving her a quick scan. “Decided to go for a replica?”

“Yeah, in Karanak.” Mira stood and posed, showing off the new robe. “What do you think?”

As a replica, it was far inferior to the original article, both in craftsmanship and stats. But the color and shape were similar, so it met Mira’s most valued

criterion: the *looks cool* factor.

“I see. It suits you to a T.” Solomon smirked. To him, she looked like a little girl playing dress-up.

“Doesn’t it?” Mira said, oblivious. “Why change a winning formula, after all?”

She sat back down with a look of pride. Then she remembered that her actual robe should still be back in her tower. After the eventful time she’d had while relieving herself and dashing to the bath on her first night back in Silverhorn, she’d carelessly chucked it into the changing room.

I’ll have to head back and pick that up sooner or later.

She began to plan her next steps. They couldn’t go after Soul Howl until they figured out where he was going from the documents, and that was the only clue available to them at the moment. Thus, she figured she’d pull what supplies they might need from storage at the tower. She found herself thinking back on what had occurred on her trip back from Karanak. They *did* have another clue as to the possible whereabouts of one of the Nine Wise Men...maybe.

“Oho, that’s right. There was something else I wanted to ask you about.”

“All right, shoot.” Solomon kicked off against his desk, sending his chair rolling off toward the window. He’d been doing paperwork for what seemed like ages, and a chat with his friend was a welcome diversion.

“I’ve heard that there have been multiple incidents of spirits being attacked. Know anything about that?”

Mira thought he might have some background on what she’d learned from the wind spirit. Slightly taken aback by Mira’s question, Solomon let out a small, impressed huff. “So you know about that too? As far as we can tell, it started in the forests north of Grimdart...maybe nine years back or thereabouts. Almost all of the spirits in that region vanished.”

“Almost all?”

The Grimdart Empire was the northernmost of the Three Great Kingdoms. They worshipped the God of Justice, and the empire was also called the Kingdom of Chivalry. Along Grimdart’s northern frontier was a vast forest that

stretched to the ends of the continent and covered an area nearly five times as large as the Kingdom of Alcait. A forest like that must have been home to countless numbers of spirits.

“They haven’t done a full inspection for remaining spirits yet, naturally, but rumors say the place is deserted. The reason was completely unknown at the time—and Grimdart took the lead on the search—but similar reports started coming in from the surrounding nations. At first, it was blamed on an outbreak of Elemental Eaters and subspecies were identified...but a survey team sent out to look for remaining spirits discovered the group that was capturing them. The perpetrators were described as armed mercenaries transporting a number of spirits in cages.”

“Hrmm. It seems the issue is spreading.”

The wind spirit had mentioned that quite a few spirits had been attacked, but based on what Solomon had just told her, it seemed the problem was far worse. The survey team only had a few members suitable for combat, so rather than foolishly engage the mercenaries, the team chose to return with the information.

“Each country is conducting their own investigation into the matter, but the *reason* behind the kidnappings is still unknown. I made some discreet inquiries into the trafficking markets, but there weren’t any spirits for sale. All I know is the name of the implicated group—the Chimera Clausen.” Solomon stared out the window and muttered, “A fancy name for an atrocity.”

When his brief surge of anger passed, he turned back to Mira with a lighter expression. “The Union has been informing adventurers of A-Rank or greater about this, and there’s a reward for more information. But it’s being kept quiet from the general public for the time being. *You* apparently heard about all this, though. Who did you hear it from?” He assumed it had come from one of the guild members Mira had mentioned earlier.

“On my way back, I ran into a wind spirit. She told me about it.”

“Oh... A wind spirit, you say...” he replied, stunned. As a warrior, he was unable to see or speak with spirits. It seemed that what was commonplace for Mira was miraculous for him.

“She was playing with a little black cat shikigami,” Mira added, an amused look on her face. She went on to tell Solomon about the encounter and what the wind spirit had heard about the attackers from her kin. She also mentioned how the spirit had been attacked before Meowmaru jumped to the rescue, and how the cat seemed to be sticking with the spirit as a protector.

“Meowmaru? That has Kagura written all over it. I wonder if she’s mixed up in this?”

“I had the same thought. The spirit said it hadn’t met any mages. Anyways, seeing as we don’t have any other leads, we might as well look into it.”

“Indeed. A medium standing up against the Chimera Clausen. Very interesting. Maybe I’ll assign some spies to look into the matter.” Illuminated by the light coming in through the window, Solomon smiled as though he’d just come up with an ingenious idea and rocked back against his chair.

The two longtime friends devolved into idle chatter and enjoyed each other’s company. To Mira, it was merely conversation, but for Solomon, it was a precious respite from a deluge of paperwork.

Chapter 3

A CLERK DELIVERED another large load of paperwork about an hour later, causing Solomon's sunny expression to cloud over.

"Well, I guess it's time for me to be somewhere else," said Mira, standing to make her escape. Solomon glanced her way with an expectant expression.

"You have no interest in king's work?"

"You really think I'd be good at it?" she asked, beginning to feel as if she might someday answer to a higher calling. She wouldn't have minded helping at all...but paperwork always left her at a loss.

That newfound sense of purpose deflated quickly when Solomon muttered, "I suppose not," and slumped back in his chair. "We'll probably get a lead on Soul Howl sometime in the next few days. As for our mysterious medium, I have no clue. But I'll let you know when I find something out. So that's where we're at for the moment."

"Hmmm, I suppose."

Solomon reluctantly turned to the paperwork awaiting him, then asked, "You've got a few days free. What are you planning on doing?"

"So long as I'm here, I might as well be a tourist for a bit." Mira gazed out at the cityscape. "Then I think I'll return to the tower."

"Sounds fun. This city is my pride and joy, so I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself. Oh, and if you could bring me some of those magic stones you have stashed away, I'd be most appreciative."

"We'll see if I remember." Mira shrugged with feigned indifference.

Solomon smirked. "Well, see you."

"Yeah, have fun."

Stepping out of the office, Mira turned down the hallway. At that moment, a door opened and Lily stepped through it.

"Ah!" Mira gasped, her face twitching as a joyous expression bloomed across

the maid's face.

"Oh, my! How wonderful to see you again, Miss Mira. Has your business concluded?" She bowed perfectly as befitting a palace maidservant, but when she straightened, she was beaming widely.

"Hrmm, I was just leaving, actually," Mira mumbled.

"Were you? I don't suppose you have a moment? My fellow maids and I have just completed our finest work yet!"

"Well, I... All right, then." Mira offered a reluctant nod.

It was a foregone conclusion. Mira was resigned to her fate from the moment she saw Lily. If she surrendered now, perhaps she could meet her fate swiftly and with little suffering.

Lily led the way through a maze of hallways until they arrived at the end of a long corridor. Opening a door to usher Mira inside, she busied herself looking for whatever infernal outfit the maids had crafted in Mira's absence.

It was a sewing space packed with fabric and half-finished pieces of clothing. Mira seemed to recall that this room was in the section of the palace called "the production block," and it seemed like the maids took that name seriously. This was a sanctum where they spent their nights giving form to their dreams and desires.

For the moment, it was quiet, perhaps because it was midday and most of the serving staff was at work. Mira stood as she waited, gazing nervously at the various maid outfits hanging on the walls. No two were exactly the same, each sporting its own unique flair and charm.

She studied the arrayed uniforms, mentally picking and choosing which would best fit the people she knew. This one for Emella, that one for Flicker...

Two down from the top, third from the right. No, or maybe that one on the bottom row, four from the left...

"Are you interested in a maid's uniform as well, Miss Mira?"

"Ack! No! I-I was just..." Mira leapt in surprise at the sudden voice behind her. "They're lovely, but no. No."

“Wouldn’t you like to try one on?”

“Oh, no, not for me. Thank you.” She worked to regain her composure, struggling between the mortification that would be wearing a maid’s uniform and the silent admission that she would look very good doing it.

“Very well. If the fancy ever strikes, just let me know. I can tailor the design to your exact liking.” There was a hint of disappointment in Lily’s voice, and Mira doubted the maid would give up that easily. Sooner or later, she would make good on her offer, whether Mira liked it or not.

“Now then, Miss Mira, feast your eyes on this! A special set of technomancy robes made just for you!”

Mira was speechless.

“Oh... Oho... Ho ho ho!”

The garment stuck to the prior trend of gothic lolita fashion, but it cut through her prepared excuses with a single slash. In a *good* way.

She devoured the outfit with her eyes, nodding with each flourish and touch that met with her satisfaction. Earlier design choices were still present, but the overly elaborate frills and bows had been eliminated. Just a few bits of flair here and there to accentuate key points. It added *stylishness* to the cuteness and wove sci-fi chic into the magical-girl aesthetic. Mira had been a fan of that sort of look in the past.

It looked like something the boss of a mages’ organization might wear: a black-and-white sleeveless dress topped with a black coat with purple accents.

“What do you think?”

“Hrmm, it’s quite nice.” That was an understatement. It was right up her alley.

She was surprised by her own approval. Given previous examples of the maids’ work, she assumed that this outfit was going to look like a ribbon factory had sneezed.

“How wonderful. After we gave you those last outfits, King Solomon was kind enough to inform us what styles you would prefer.”

“Did he now?”

Solomon would have an idea of what her tastes were, after all. They both liked the same sci-fi magical-girl shows. On second glance, she realized that this outfit actually resembled *his* favorite character's design.

That jerk! Now he's playing dress-up too!

She looked at the large white leather belt integrated into the design of the dress and the short front of the coat that wouldn't hide her legs when closed. That was Solomon's doing, for sure.

"All right, Miss Mira, step this way," Lily said as she led Mira to a fitting room and handed her the clothing. "Do you require assistance?"

"I've got this handled, thanks."

Mira accepted the outfit and disappeared behind the curtain to find a large mirror and a set of shelves on either side. Placing the new clothing on a shelf, she tugged at her hem as she began to change.

Lily beamed in admiration as Mira stepped from behind the curtain.

"It suits you perfectly, Miss Mira!"

"You think?"

The Elder summoner tried to maintain her cool composure, but her chuckles as she checked the fit gave her away. The clothes made by the palace maid corps were top-notch quality—they fit perfectly and didn't hinder any movement.

"Now, let me explain some of the added features," Lily said, leading Mira over to a table where several papers were spread out.

"First, these are the names of everyone who assisted in creating your personal set of technomancy robes."

"That's a lot of names."

The list of credits stretched across the page and even included Solomon and Luminaria. There were so many she could only skim through, but she noticed Toma, lead designer of the Accord Cannon.

"As the name implies, technomancy was utilized in the creation of this outfit,

and this manual explains how it works.”

“Technomancy, eh? That sounds...dangerous.”

Mira thought of the FAV—the surprisingly modern, surprisingly terrifying armored car that Solomon had developed and Garrett piloted. She glanced down at the clothes she was wearing, but Lily shook her head as if to allay her misgivings.

“There’s absolutely nothing to worry about. In fact, with the benefits it provides, I can guarantee that you’ll gladly continue to be our dress-up—ahem, you’ll gladly continue to accept our outfits.”

“I’m sorry... Were you about to say ‘dress-up doll’?”

“No, I don’t believe I was.”

Mira shot her a glance, but Lily looked away and pretended not to notice. Mira decided to let it slide and turned back to the instructions.

“Now, then, allow me to explain,” said Lily. “Let’s start with the most important feature. The belt on the dress houses a small compartment that can store a Magic Stone or Mobility Stone.”

Opening Mira’s coat, Lily reached toward the integrated belt and opened the black buckle in the center. Sure enough, a single stone would fit neatly inside.

“Oho. That’s handy,” Mira muttered to herself as she opened and closed the buckle.

“That is what makes this a proper technomancy robe. The magical properties of the inserted stone provide all sorts of benefits!” Lily explained with pride.

She’d only been involved in the selection and preparation of the fabric, so this portion of the explanation came by way of Toma. In preparation for this event, she had hounded Toma daily for information until she had memorized everything.

“Now, as for the general status enhancements...” She flawlessly repeated everything he’d told her. “The dress and the coat were made to be resistant to both fire and ice, though do be aware that it doesn’t protect against extreme temperatures. Using the right Magic Stone should even block the flames of a

phoenix! It will also cause the outfit to self-mend...within reason. If the damage is too great, it will fail to repair itself. When a Magic Stone is inserted, it will strengthen defense in accordance with the attuned element.”

Pleased with her flawless recollection of the details, Lily shot Mira a triumphant look. Meanwhile, Mira was running her hands over the outfit, exploring with great interest.

“Oho. Very useful.”

Mira was honestly surprised by the abilities. It seemed the outfit had greatly exceeded her expectations in every way. It still wasn’t at the level of her replica robe, but these technomancy robes were quite high-spec. With the effect activated, they might even have superior defense.

Well, she could always switch back and forth between the two. Her interest growing in the new outfit, she began to mentally go back over the features.

“This all sounds like it cost quite the pretty ducat. Are you sure I can just have it?”

Normally, equipment with that level of performance would be pretty expensive. Mira looked up at Lily with curiosity.

“But of course. The expenses were covered by King Solomon and Lady Luminaria. It’s entirely yours.”

“Were they now?” The two hadn’t said a word about any of this. She smiled, wondering if she had been set up by the pair of them.

Conspiracy or not, I’ll have to show my appreciation, she thought. They went out of their way to keep it secret, so it wouldn’t do to just say thank you. She’d have to find them the perfect gift as well.

Lily escorted Mira through the sewing room to the maidservants’ quarters, where the other maids were waiting to dote on her. They had all helped with the creation of the outfit, so Mira couldn’t leave them hanging. Soon, they were putting her hair up into all sorts of different styles.

Honestly, she was getting somewhat used to being treated this way. The array of sweets they’d put out for her certainly helped take the edge off.

She had a quite lovely teatime and did her best to ignore the commotion going on around her head.

It was just past lunchtime, but after the mound of snacks she'd consumed in the maid's quarters, Mira was feeling sated. She made her way out of the palace and into the city, intent on sightseeing.

On her way out, she paused briefly for pleasantries with the guards at the palace gate. Solomon had informed them that Mira was Danblf's pupil, and that gave her free license to come and go as she pleased.

Her thoughts meandered to the academy. Even from a distance, she'd been struck by the impressive architecture. Then she glanced around her immediate surroundings.

"Now, how do I get there from here?"

Despite the methodical layout of the city, it was difficult for Mira to get her bearings once she was on the street. She wandered around, looking this way and that. Just as despair was beginning to set in, a patrolling guard appeared.

He was momentarily awestruck by her long silver hair, but he realized a moment later just who she was. He hurriedly dipped into a bow. As a pupil of one of the Nine Wise Men, Mira was a guest of honor in the city and her physical description had been widely circulated.

She trotted over to him and asked, "Quick question: How do I get to the academy from here?"

"Ah, Miss Mira, is it? Let's see...the academy. Just cross the bridge behind you and head straight along the main road."

"Oho, I see. Thank you."

Turning in the direction the guard was pointing, she spotted the bridge. After glancing back to thank him again, she took off toward the academy at a brisk jog. The guard relaxed, relieved that he'd kept his cool as he stared after her. He found himself captivated by the bouncing pigtails.

One of the defining landmarks of the Kingdom of Alcait was the great crescent-shaped lake at the center of the capital. The area hugging the inner curve was the high-rent district, and from there, one could reach outlying areas by crossing bridges that cut across the lake.

Mira trudged her way across one of those causeways. It was ten meters wide and paved with thin ocher stones that stretched off into the distance. Streetlamps were evenly spaced along the sides, giving it a sense of class and acting as a subtle reminder that it connected to one of the wealthier parts of town.

The lake was wider than she remembered, but after some trekking, she finally reached the opposite shore.

“Ah, Lady Mira! Heading to the general districts?”

The question came from the guard at the gate between the bridge and the city beyond. The gate itself wasn’t that big, maybe just wide enough for a single carriage to pass through. A small room set up alongside it afforded the guards shelter from the elements.

“Hrmm, thought I’d do some sightseeing.”

“A wonderful day to tour our fine city. I’ll open the gate, if you would kindly stand clear.”

He stepped back into the guardhouse and the gate slowly opened. Through the widening gap, it was evident that this area of the city was worlds apart from the elegance of the district behind her. It was filled with life and energy, as crowds of common townsfolk went about their business.

Mira waved to the guard in thanks, then stepped through the gate into Lunatic Lake’s Eastern District. A wide street led to Alcait Academy, and she marveled again at the wonders around her as she made her way along the boulevard.

The shops lining the main street offered a wide selection of goods. Many carried general wares, but the nearby academy meant that a number of stationery stores were doing brisk business in this part of town.

Mira was surprised to find an overwhelming number of shops selling mages’

implements. Whichever way she turned, there was another store dealing in magical tools and gear. There were items for almost all disciplines of magic—wands serving as weapons, catalysts for a sorcerer's spells, talismans for mediums, sacred stones for clerics, holy water for demonologists, and more. There were even a few stores selling Magic Stones and enchanted items.

Feeling the prickles of excitement, Mira gave in to her instinct to window-shop and flitted between stalls, passing the time and thoroughly enjoying herself. Her eyes feasted on the mix of classic staples and never-before-seen products. Whenever she saw something new, she asked a clerk what it did with eyes aglitter. Some shop owners explained happily, some nervously, and some very carefully and thoroughly.

Her urge to window-shop completely satisfied, Mira finally arrived at her destination in front of the academy.

"It's huge," she blurted softly. It was true—the grounds of Alcait Academy were as expansive as an airport. The three largest buildings on the grounds faced a magnificent quad. There were other structures on the campus, but they paled in comparison.

For the Elder of the Tower of Evocation to stand boldly out in the open while staring at the front of a school felt somewhat...undignified. Mira hid herself behind the front gate and peeked around the corner. Unfortunately, that just made her seem even more suspicious.

In the schoolyard, students were honing their physical strengths. Some were sparring, while others were running laps. In one corner, a man was teaching a martial arts course to about thirty children dressed in gym clothes. On the opposite end, a male instructor and a female instructor addressed a formation of sixty robed students. The sheer size of the quad made the number of students seem fewer.

Mira watched with amusement as they practiced—the scale might've been extreme, but it was definitely a school.

"Such youthful exuberance," she muttered to herself. Back in her original world, she was six years out of university, and the nostalgic feeling caused her to smile.

“Are you interested in attending the academy?” a voice came from behind her.

Mira reflexively trembled as she realized she’d been caught spying. Fearfully... slowly...*creakingly*, she turned to see who had caught her. Half crouched behind her was a woman with cat ears and a gentle smile with a large book bag slung over her shoulder.

Chapter 4

THE CAT-EARED WOMAN looming over Mira had chestnut-brown hair that reached down to just below her shoulders, a round face with blue catlike eyes, and a disarmingly innocent smile.

Mira knew of many races. There were elves like Emella and fairies like Mariana. The woman crouched before her was one of the miao, a race known for excellent kinetic vision and agility. They looked very similar to humans, if humans were a little shorter and had a pair of cat ears and a tail. They could also see well in the dark.

All in all, your standard issue cat-folk.

“Ah, didn’t mean to scare you like that. I’m Hinata, one of the instructors. And you are?”

“I’m Mira.”

She was more cute than beautiful, and the happy smile on her face only emphasized that. Mira had thought herself accustomed to the miao, but the slight purr that accompanied the woman’s smile was uncanny.



“Mira. That’s a cute name.” Hinata’s smile grew as she looked down at Mira’s attire.

They’d only just met, but Hinata seemed open and honest. Her radiant sincerity surprised Mira. But that didn’t explain why an instructor was wandering around off campus during the school day.

“Isn’t that one of those popular magical-girl outfits? And they’re robes! Do you want to become a mage?” she asked, smile never faltering. Why else would a young girl be peeking around at the campus?

“Oh, no, I’m already a mage,” Mira said, and Hinata’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“I see. My apologies. Do you mind if I ask which discipline?” Hinata asked, glossing over her earlier slip.

“I am a *summoner*!” Mira declared triumphantly.

Hinata froze, the smile still stuck to her face. Throughout the academy, summoning was considered to be a bleak specialty in a state of decline.

“Oh... Well, good luck with that.” Hinata’s words sounded almost more for herself than for Mira. “I’m a summoner myself. I even teach summoning here at the academy. But, well, you know how it is. Futureless discipline, they say. But right now, Master Cleos is working around the clock to get us back on track. He’s very optimistic about the odds for success. So let’s keep fighting.”

Unbeknownst to Mira, the current trend was for students who had an aptitude for summoning along with anything else to study the alternate discipline, no matter how great a summoner they may have been. If *all* a student had was summoning, then they’d usually take general education courses to accumulate enough credits to graduate, ignoring magic altogether. A degree from Alcait Academy was enough of a feather in one’s cap, and there was no point in attending classes for a dying technique.

Summoning classes were held just two or three times per week. The only students who attended were those who were too stubborn to give up on being a mage or who were attending out of morbid curiosity. Hinata had a lot of extra time to help out other teachers, lending a hand or running errands where she

could. Teachers and students had begun to assume she was a clerk.

“Hrmm, so the problem has spread this far.”

Based on Hinata’s attitude, Mira knew that the decline of summoning had cast its shadow over the academy as well. That meant it was affecting the future of students at the school. This was a dark time, indeed.

At the very least, it sounded like the equipment and Blasting Stones that Mira had left with Cleos were being put to good use. With those, it shouldn’t be too difficult for prospective students to forge contracts with Dark Knights and Holy Knights. Those two spirits were the cornerstone of the summoning arts. After that, it was down to individual aptitude and hard work.

“Right now, it’s still just one at a time to ensure safety... But the number of students who can summon armor spirits is increasing! Our time will come soon.” Hinata put on her best strong face in response to Mira’s displeased mutters.

Blasting stones were enough to defeat an armor spirit, but without protective gear, the summoner might still be in danger. She’d given Cleos some items that would increase the bearer’s strength and stamina, but there were only enough for one person. It wasn’t right to needlessly expose students to dangerous situations.

Cleos must have been personally selecting hopefuls and helping them achieve their first armor-spirit summoning contract. It offered those interested in summoning a glimmer of hope to hang on to, but the waiting list must have been insanely long.

“I wonder what I can do to assist?” Mira ruminated and stroked her chin.

What could she do to help the younger generation? She could mass-produce more Blasting Stones, but that would require a lot of time and money. Probably better to arrange for the palace refiners to do that by having a word with Solomon and Cleos.

The bigger problem was the lack of gear that could augment one’s physique—enough to take on armor spirits in relative safety. The quickest option would be to raid her storage room at the tower for something she already had in stock,

but she wouldn't have much left after what she'd given Cleos. It looked like she might have some long nights refining equipment in her future.

"Mira! Miss Mira!" Hinata roughly shook her shoulders, snapping her back to reality.

"Wh-what is it?" She opened her eyes to find the feline's face looming just before her.

"That's a User's Bangle, isn't it? That means you're a veteran adventurer!" Hinata grabbed Mira's left hand and stared excitedly at the bracelet on her arm.

"Well, in a way, I suppose..." That wasn't quite right, but Mira didn't feel like taking the time to explain it was actually her Control Terminal. Besides, her adventurer's rank was high enough to allow her to rent a User's Bangle, so what was the harm in agreeing?

"I can summon Dark Knights, Holy Knights, hellhounds, salamanders, carbuncles, and wyverns. Do you have anything outside of that list?"

Mira wasn't sure why Hinata was asking, but her expectant look and strange intensity made Mira give an affirmative nod.

Immediately, Hinata's eyes narrowed in, like a cat spotting her prey. Grasping both of Mira's hands in her own, she knelt before her as if in prayer. She begged, "Please. Please help me, just a little bit."

Thanks to her kneeling position, she had to slightly look upward to meet Mira's eyes as she pleaded for assistance. Normally, Mira was immune to theatrics, but this time, it struck home. The twitching of her adorable cat ears certainly didn't hurt.

"I'll do whatever I can."

Mira was pretty sure it had to do something with summoning techniques. She wasn't sure how she could help, but what she *did* know was that the future of her discipline was on the line.

After being dragged by the hand across the academy grounds, Mira was led to a smaller building located behind the central school building. Hinata provided

more information regarding the request as she towed Mira along.

The school held a monthly event known as the Spell Symposium. Each school of magic would display techniques to be examined and judged. The judging didn't determine the ranking directly, but the scores would be publicly announced, and they influenced the funding and facilities made available to the various disciplines. The various practices of magic would each present a representative to perform on their behalf.

Every month, summoning came in dead last.

The students couldn't use summoning on a practical level, leaving Hinata—being the best in the school—to continuously serve as the representative for the discipline. And since she only had a small repertoire of summons, the novelty had worn off years ago. Cleos might have been able to wow the judges with a few new tricks, but as acting Elder, he was forbidden from competing.

But now there was hope. All Mira had to do was summon anything other than the six already listed. Excited by the opportunity to restore some of the luster to the summoning arts, she immediately began mentally sorting through her advanced summons. Mira wondered which one would be the flashiest.

I need something that will establish summoning as the greatest of the arts. Obviously, that's the Imperial Dragon Eizenfald. He's always been well behaved. But then again, the Rainbow Spirit Twinkle Pom would be the most colorful... Or, hmmm, I suppose it's been thirty years, hasn't it?

As she mulled over the matter, she looked up, and a thought struck her. It might not do for a visiting adventurer to barge in and decide the direction of the school for a month.

"Are outsiders even allowed to participate?" she asked Hinata.

"I think it will be fine. The event is to judge the *potential* of the arts, and an outsider using an amazing technique still shows what the discipline is capable of."

Mira nodded. "Hmmm, makes sense."

"I think so. Wait here while I go change our designated representative."

“Sure.”

Mira took a look around as she found a seat on a nearby sofa. The floor was covered with institutional-gray carpet, and a clock on the wall read twenty minutes past four. The ceiling was fairly low, and the white spheres used for lighting gave off a dim fluorescent glow. It was a perfectly ordinary room, as far as she could tell. Even the white board in the corner was a schoolroom standard.

Pulling an apple au lait from her Item Box, Mira took a sip and sighed.

“Looks like I’ve got my work cut out for me,” she muttered, thinking of how hard Cleos was pushing himself for the cause. It was her duty as Elder of the Tower of Evocation.

“Thanks for waiting.” It was two minutes to five, and Mira had just finished enjoying her drink when Hinata returned to the room. “We should be set! Thank you so much for helping.”

“You’re in capable hands,” Mira said, following Hinata from the room.

She soon found herself in another waiting room adjacent to the judging venue. Simple seats had been provided, and a number of mages and their attendants were present.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the mighty summoner. Arriving so late? You must be confident,” said a foppish-looking man with a contemptuous sneer. His blue robes marked him as the representative from the school of sorcery.

The rest of the room turned toward Hinata as well, their expressions a mix of pity, sympathy, and exasperation. Hinata responded with a brief wave before snagging Mira’s hand and directing her toward a vacant seat.

The blue-robed mage clicked his tongue and raised his eyebrows as he spotted Mira sitting in the corner of the room.

“Little miss, that’s a seat for competitors,” he said condescendingly, causing his attendant to smirk. The other mages reacted in their own ways, whispering, “Don’t pick a fight,” “How boorish,” and “There he goes again,” but none held

the same obvious disdain as him.

“I-It’s fine. She’s our representative this month,” Hinata chimed in with pursed lips, trembling with frustration. Even if others in the room held *her* in high esteem, the school of summoning was still on the outs. For better or worse, the academy was a meritocracy, and it was painfully obvious that a hierarchy had been established.

“I see. So schools are all the same no matter where you go,” Mira murmured, just loudly enough for the sorcerer to hear. She’d taken one look at him and dismissed him as nothing special. “Filled with mediocre people who try to increase their standing by stepping on others.”

The man’s eyes darkened. “What was that?” In his mind, someone from an ever-failing practice with few students to speak of had no right to speak to him that way.

“She’s right; you’re acting childish,” said a white-robed woman sitting a few chairs down.

“Hardly. It’s our duty as adults to put disrespectful children in their place.” He attempted to level an intimidating glare at Mira.

“Whoa, whoa, that’s enough of that,” a black-robed magician cut in, attempting to calm the situation with a soothing hand. The sorcerer knocked it away in a fit of rage.

With mounting dread, Hinata began to wonder just what she’d gotten herself into.

“The biggest fools always talk the most,” Mira said. “I’ve met goblins with better manners.”

“Hey, watch what you say! Don’t you know who I am?!”

“Some sort of spoiled man-child?”

“Why, you...!” The sorcerer sprang to his feet and glanced at the quivering Hinata, then grinned wickedly.

“Thank you for your patience,” came a voice from the doorway. “We will now proceed to the venue.”

Heads turned toward the upper-level student who was acting as an event staffer that afternoon. The tension had been broken, but the sorcerer turned to cast a withering glare at Mira before clicking his tongue and heading toward the door.

I suppose I've been acting a bit childish myself. Mira shrugged as Hinata bowed her head apologetically.

“Sorry you had to see that, Mira...” Her ears flattened and her tail hung limp, but then a figure appeared at her side—the woman in the white robe. Hinata glanced up at her. “Oh, hello, Mary...”

Mary, who appeared to be in her twenties, had long, aqua-blue hair held up by a silver disk decorated with a cross. The pendant around her neck was emblazoned with a stylized tree branch. She was obviously a member of one of the specialty programs at the academy.

“You should have known better, Professor Hinata. What possessed you to drag a child into this?” In contrast to her mild-mannered appearance, Mary gave Hinata a tongue-lashing, causing the summoner to cringe to cringe. She turned to Mira and smiled. “Don’t you worry about him.”

Mira stood. “I don’t.”

“Is this child really your representative?” Mary asked, skeptical. For decades, there had been a scant few new summoners, so her doubt was warranted.

“Mira is a veteran adventurer,” Hinata said. “She claims to know even more summoning spells than me.”

“Even so, you—”

“Well, what’s the harm?” Mira cut in. “I’m not worried, nor is Professor Hinata. You shouldn’t be either.”

Mira smiled at Hinata, who’d been growing despondent. Swallowing the rest of her statement, Mary scanned Mira, who seemed somehow larger than she appeared. Just who was she? *What is it with this child? Her mannerisms don’t match her appearance at all.* Mary found herself thinking of King Solomon and couldn’t help cracking a smile. Perhaps he and Mira were related in some way.

“So who was that stuck-up jerk?” Mira asked. “What makes him think he’s so special?”

“Well, about that...” Hinata’s ears twitched slightly as she began to explain.

The sorcerer was Caerus Verlan, son of Marquis Alphonse Verlan and the latest in a long line of aristocratic sorcerers. He was a third-year upperclassman at the academy—and, attitude aside, he was quite the skilled mage. Thanks to him, the school of sorcery consistently ranked highest, and the students had begun to look down upon the other disciplines. Skills aside, his prestigious lineage made it difficult for professors from more common backgrounds to correct his poor behavior.

Typical stuck-up nobility. Mira sighed and smiled bitterly, realizing that entitled brats were a universal constant in academia.

Mira and company stepped through a large door into a big coliseum, its domed roof high overhead. The ground was covered in soft earth, and the arena was surrounded by a wall three meters tall. Brilliant lights hung at each cardinal direction, banishing any shadows.

They passed a mannequin dressed in knight’s armor as they entered, beckoned in by a man wearing a white coat in the center of the arena—presumably the master of ceremonies. Above the arena floor, dozens of well-dressed men and women looked down at the newcomers from the stands.

The representatives filed along the walls on either side of the entrance. Caerus shot Mira an irritated look as she, Hinata, and Mary lined up against the opposite wall. He and his attendant were standing alone—it was apparent that summoners weren’t the only ones who disliked him.

Ignoring him, Mira focused on the matter at hand. The judging area was not only indoors but also smaller than she expected. She only had a fifteen-meter circle to work with; it was just too small.

Well, that rules out Eizenfald! Maybe the Rainbow Spirit, then... But she might not fit the mood of this event. What to do?

As Mira waffled between her options, the emcee shouted, “Thank you all for

waiting. The Spell Symposium will now begin!”

Chapter 5

THE EMCEE GAVE a quick summary of the rules, more for the sake of the audience than the contestants. There were two key points: One, each representative would be given ample time to perform their chosen technique. Two, offensive techniques were to target the dummy, and the dummy only. Its armor had been enchanted to provide additional defense. Hinata helpfully supplied Mira with additional information as the emcee addressed the crowd.

The judges for this event would be a mix of board members, wealthy donors, professors, and the headmaster. The rest of the audience was made up of students, members of the PTA, and alumni. Contestants would be scored based on their techniques' difficulty, potency, and speed. Style and panache were also important, even if they weren't directly scored. As more wealthy donors joined the judges, the panel's overall understanding of the magical arts suffered. Nowadays, no matter how advanced or difficult a technique might be, if it looked boring, its score would suffer. As an aside, the ethereal arts were exempt from the event. All mages could make use of such techniques, and as such, a certain level of funding was always granted to the discipline.

This symposium served as an inspirational showcase as well as a benchmark for budget allocation. Prospective patrons were known to attend the exhibitions and make private donations to a particular school of magic if they found themselves duly impressed. If a discipline consistently performed well, then they would even be rewarded with an additional allocation of facilities on campus. That was more of an implicit arrangement, however.

Guests of these symposiums often included influential nobles, merchants, and adventurers. The more power a school could display, the more lucrative patrons they would attract and the more powerful their backers.

Most of the representatives had been selected from among the student body based on recommendations from their peers and professors. If multiple students were nominated within the same discipline, a selection test would be held before the event to determine the contestant. If there were no students available, a teacher would fill in—Hinata's plight in a nutshell.

But having outsiders attend wasn't unheard of. If a discipline didn't have a candidate, they could nominate one from outside the academy. On one such occasion, a researcher from the Linked Silver Towers came to participate. Naturally, that person dominated the competition. At the following year's symposium—as a direct result, no doubt—every school of magic was represented by a researcher. The contest soon devolved into little more than testing grounds for the group of researchers, and after that, fellows of the Silver Towers were barred from entry.

Mira, however, was participating as an adventurer on referral.

“Now, then, we shall begin with the Department of Sorcery, as they achieved the highest scores at the previous symposium,” said the emcee, beckoning to Caerus. “Back then, the Department of Sorcery received near-perfect marks for a delightful display of water magic. What technique will they wow us with today? Will the representative please step forward?”

Caerus walked toward the center of the ring, waving affectionately to the audience. Applause echoed all around him, and he knew he had a reputation to uphold.

The emcee began to move off to the side of the arena, but Caerus snagged him before he could depart, hissing into the officiant's ear, “Not *last* time. *Every* time.”

“Ah... Right. Of course, My apologies.”

“Watch yourself.”

The whispered exchange didn't reach the other representatives, much less the audience. But Mira could tell that an act of bullying had just taken place.

“Stupid commoners,” Caerus muttered as he turned to the mannequin. Almost all sorcery techniques focused on overwhelming attacks. In terms of raw magical damage, one could be forgiven for assuming they were the strongest mage class. There was little surprise that the armored dummy was going to be his target this afternoon.

“Thank you all for taking the time to be here with us at the symposium! I am Caerus Verlan, and it is our privilege to dazzle you today!” He bowed gracefully

toward the audience. No one bothered asking why he seemed to be speaking on behalf of all the gathered disciplines. The other representatives had long since given up on trying to correct his grandstanding.

Mira had other concerns, namely deciding which of her summons had the right personality, flair, and safety margin. *What about Alfina? No. She would hate being treated as a sideshow attraction. And the roof might cave in...*

“Hrmm...”

“Feast your eyes on the miracles of sorcery!” Caerus took a half step back and held his right hand out toward the mannequin. As his mana coalesced on his hand, a magic circle appeared before it. “Burning all it touches, Sorcery: Flames of the Heavens!”

The magic circle glowed red, and then a small flame gathered in his palm before swelling up. It grew as large as a human head before it launched at the armor, leaving a shining tail in its wake. Mid-flight, it split into countless smaller fireballs before they all reconverged and crashed into the target. A deafening roar resounded, with sparks flying and leaving scorch marks on the armor.

The crowd went wild.

Distracted from her own musings, Mira frowned at the cacophony and looked at the center of the ring. Caerus was whipping up the audience, saying that this was only the beginning as he moved to cast his next spell. This time, he gathered magic in both hands, feeding off the audience’s fervor and raising both arms over his head in truly dramatic fashion.

“I hope you all enjoyed that little demonstration. Now, let me invite you all to the Banquet of Fire!” he shouted. “Host of flames soaring through the sky, obey your master and destroy thy foe!”

A magic circle appeared with Caerus at the center, and then fireballs fanned out around him. As they reached an appropriate size, they shot forth one by one to slam into the ground, the walls, and the mannequin. An unceasing burst of explosions filled the arena with a cloud of sparks and smoke.

Hrmm. How crude, Mira mentally critiqued. *No precision, no timing. Just awful. If it’s an area of effect he’s after, Sorcery: Scorching Blast would be much*

better.

His spell might work against low-level monsters, but it had no place in actual combat. It was far too telegraphed and inaccurate. But it wowed the judges. They were left speechless as they watched the countless fireballs twinkle through the air like a meteor shower. It was a veritable banquet of fire, as promised—but that was all it was.

To Mira, it was like watching nobles who'd grown tired of their riches tossing a handful of gold coins in the air. A vulgar display of excess in a vain attempt to impress the commoners. Caerus's sorcery was pleasing to the eye, but it was wasteful with no functional purpose. Not even ten years since the signing of the non-aggression pact, this was the level magic had sunk to.

His performance completed, the judges each marked down their scores. They wouldn't be announced until all the representatives had performed, but no doubt he'd come close to perfection. As Caerus returned to his position along the wall, he shot a disgusting smirk at Mira and Hinata. Hinata's cat ears lay flat and her gaze dropped, and Caerus's expression became even smugger.

Contestants followed in descending order of the previous symposium's standings.

A cleric took center stage next, casting Holy Arts: Shield Skin, a technique that nullified a designated source of damage. They had their attendant blast away with offensive spells to show that they remained completely unharmed. This was followed by Holy Arts: Arc Gate, which pelted the dummy with an intense beam of light. This seemed to make a good impression on the judges, and the crowd applauded enthusiastically.

The third contestant was a medium. They opened with Celestial Arts: Wood—Giant Forest, causing a grove of trees to fill the area. This was followed by Celestial Arts: Fire—Crimson Fox, which created a fox kit made of flames. The tiny creature danced between the trees for a few moments before charging headlong at the armored mannequin and exploding dramatically.

A sage stepped to the center. Their presentation started with a martial arts display with both hands wreathed in fire by way of their Immortal Arts Earth: Enveloping Blaze technique. The flames were less compressed than they should

be, Mira noted disapprovingly—but the traces lingering behind the thrown punches painted a crimson lotus in the air. As a finish, they thrust their hands toward the dummy while executing the Immortal Arts, Heaven: Pulse at close range, sending fire scattering wildly.

An exorcist first took out a bottle of holy water, opened it, and threw it straight up into the air. As they activated their Veiled Arts: Spirit Banishment technique, the bottle shattered, raining shards of glass and holy water over the surrounding area. The arena floor began to glow, and a thin film of light appeared. The exorcist grabbed several more bottles of holy water and threw them at the mannequin, activating their Banished Commandment: Flames of Atonement. Blue fire enveloped the mannequin and the ground around it, quietly flickering.

A demonologist was up next. Using Demonic Arts: Crawly Arachnea, they gained the abilities of a spider. Taking aim at the mannequin, they bound it in silken threads before casting Demonic Arts Demon: Blaze Hound which caused them to sprout flaming claws from both hands. As they touched the spider thread, the flame raced along like a fuse before engulfing the mannequin in crimson flames.

Next came a representative from the necromancers. With the Necromantic Arts: Rock Golem technique, they created a man-sized golem, which charged the dummy. Then they cast Internment Arts: Molten Rebirth just a moment before their golem smashed into the armor, scorching the entire area with a pillar of fire.

Thus, all the entries had been completed but one. The charred mannequin sat forlornly, awaiting the final performance.

“Will the representative for the Department of Evocation please step forward?” called the emcee. With no time left, Mira finally decided on her summon.

Okay, let's do this. I'm a little worried...but she's my best option.

“Mira...” Hinata watched Mira with concern as the girl took her first step forward into the ring.

Mira paused and flashed her a smile. “Don’t worry. This is child’s play.”

Hinata gasped at Mira's brazen confidence, then felt a surge of hope. It wasn't right for a teacher to be so downhearted. "All right! You can do it, Mira!"

The emcee moved off to the side, and all eyes were focused on the tiny girl in the middle of the arena. Hating to be the center of attention, Mira smiled weakly before tossing her right hand to the side, calling forth the Bound Arcana. As it appeared in midair, the audience stirred in surprise. Even Hinata marveled at the sight.

The Bound Arcana was an advanced summoning technique used to enhance summons, and it could only be cast by the most skilled practitioners. Hinata knew of the technique, but it was far beyond what anyone at the academy could handle. And yet, Mira did it with ease. The headmaster and some of the professors and alumni watched in admiration, excited for what might come next.

Mira drew her right hand back in and converted the Bound Arcana into a summoning circle, causing a few in the audience to cry out at the immense power contained within the array.

The impossibility of the act drew the headmaster from his seat, and he looked at the girl with astonishment. "It can't be... The Mark of the Rosary?!"

"Hey... What's going on?" asked someone nearby. "Isn't she supposed to be summoning something?"

"Yes, she is. I'm not certain, but that might be some high-level summoning circle," said a flustered staffer, trying to maintain order and watch the demonstration at the same time.

Long ago, the headmaster had seen such summons on battlefields with his own eyes. Hazy memories snapped back into vivid color as he watched the scene unfold before him. The summoning circle in the arena bore a striking resemblance to one he'd seen before.

More and more voices began to fill the coliseum as the audience watched with confusion and awe. But Mira faced the circle without care, and a chant began to weave its way from her lips.

If you can hear my voice, feel my thoughts,

Perhaps, will they wake you?

How I long to hear your words, to listen to you sing.

Echoing like a bell, right here in this moment.

[Evocation: Diva]

As her chant concluded, the summoning circle shone like the sun before shattering an instant later. As the glittering shards rained down like stars, a woman appeared in the center of the arena. She looked almost vulnerable. Her alabaster skin was wrapped in a sky-blue robe. Her light blonde hair fluttered about and shone like fine silk. But the look in her eyes was anything but demure—her gaze was sharp and burned with the conviction behind her pretty face. An ethereal melody tickled the edge of everyone’s hearing as she took in her surroundings.

“Ah, at last we meet again, Master.” She dipped into a curtsy, tears of joy springing to her eyes.

“Hrmm. It’s been a while, Leticia.”

Leticia was the Diva’s name and, as her title implied, she was a high-level spirit who governed over song and all related melodies.

“A long while. I missed you so much, I—Master, have you shrunk?!”

“No! Well...there have been some changes.”

“R-really?” Her head tilted slightly to the side, then she seemed to lose interest as another thought took precedence. “Oh, right! I’ve composed a song for you, Master.”

She began to hum a cheery tune; it was almost childish.

I...should have expected this.

Leticia was striking and strong-willed. She was also an airhead. No train of thought would stay on the tracks, and no concern for consequences would prevent her from blurting out whatever came to her mind. Back when Danblf

used to summon her in the game world, Leticia would sing and prattle on regardless of the situation. Mira smiled as she remembered when they had forged their contract.

Oblivious to Mira's worries, the audience was completely entranced. Not just because of Leticia's power and beautiful appearance, but because her little song resonated deep within their hearts as though it were the first they'd ever heard.

Before things got out of hand, Mira cut in. "Ah, perhaps next time. I was hoping to hear 'Melodia of Forest Green.'"

Leticia drew her humming to a halt and nodded. "A request?! I *love* requests!"

The audience came back to their senses as though waking from a dream and turned a reproachful eye on Mira. Why had she interrupted such a blissful experience?

They were about to find out.

Leticia's wings spread like a shimmering rainbow born of magic, and the sound of a symphony swelled through the arena. Unlike her humming, this song had layers of melody woven together in deep harmony to form a single song as the Diva sang along. Her voice was gentle, yet it reverberated with the power of a goddess. The Dark Knights and the Valkyries were instruments of battle, but her powers could heal, inspire, or grant any number of other supporting effects.

"Melodia of Forest Green" restored mana and soothed the soul. In this world, it had the added benefit of bringing comfort to all those who heard it, whether they were magically inclined or not. Nearly four minutes after Leticia began singing, the song reached its finale. As it died away, the entirety of the audience rose to a standing ovation.

Well, that should get me a top score. Oh, wait, speaking of...

While the applause echoed throughout the coliseum, Mira thought back to the earlier presentations. Each had performed a first technique and then finished with an attack against the armored mannequin. Deciding that must be how things were done, she waved and thanked the crowd before turning back to Leticia, who was still basking in the praise.

“Leticia, a ‘Requiem of Fury’ for the training dummy, if you would.”

“Another request? Certainly!” she responded before turning to the mannequin and expelling a short sharp burst of sound.

The applause stopped as the people wondered what was about to happen. They watched in dead silence for a moment, and then a popping noise came from the arena floor—the mannequin had burst into pieces.

“What...what just happened?” Someone managed to squeeze out a question, triggering those who had regained their composure—or at least some base level of thought—to ask the headmaster.

The armored mannequin had withstood attacks from all the representatives at every symposium thus far. Now it was blown away, leaving naught behind. They’d never seen such power. The “Requiem of Fury” that Mira had called for was Leticia’s only offensive song, causing resonant feedback in her target. Though it was her sole attack, it was immensely powerful and limited to three uses per day because it was hard on her throat.

This spectacle of summoning was beyond the headmaster’s wildest dreams. Despite the fearful murmurings of the crowd, he couldn’t contain the emotions welling up within.

“Splendid!” he cried, his voice rising above the clamor of the crowd.

With that, the applause started up once more. Figuring that was the end of it, Mira moved to send Leticia home. “Well done.”

Leticia pouted. “I still haven’t sung you your song yet, Master.”

“Next time, somewhere quieter.”

Leticia smiled and nodded, then vanished entirely.

Chapter 6

MIRA WAS SHOWERED with applause and adoration from the crowd. But someone else was also focused on the young summoner—Caerus.

“Ladies and gentlemen, a moment!” he called out, seething. He waved his arms like mad.

The audience went silent as they turned to see what was going on, and Caerus grinned in pleasure as the attention shifted away from Mira back to him.

“Don’t you think it a bit strange? Changing their representative on the day of the symposium? Changing their representative to a child? A *child* who surpasses the skill of even Professor Hinata herself?”

What’s he getting at? To Mira, he seemed to be grasping at straws, but some of the judges seemed to be taking him seriously. Although the onlookers had been enthralled by the performance just a moment ago, a ripple of doubt was forming and growing as he spoke.

“He has a point... Was that actually a summoning technique? Isn’t evocation just black or white knights or somesuch?” asked a young noblewoman who had only ever seen Hinata’s performances. She was part of a new generation who had grown up without ever knowing the original wonders of summoning. In fact, all of the judges swayed by Caerus’s statement were in their mid-twenties or younger, and Mira noted with growing dismay that they made up a majority of the panel.

“Is this not *the* Alcait Academy?” Caerus shouted. “Is this not the continent’s premier school of magic? Were there a summoner more powerful than our faculty, why, they’d have to be from the *towers*! I’m sure you all remember the Department of Evocation’s dismal results. No doubt Professor Hinata grew tired of always coming in last and thought she could slip in a sure winner if they were small and cute enough.”

The judges turned their attention to Mira with numerous questions on their minds.

Mira’s head spun and she wanted to stamp her feet in anger. *How could*

summoning have fallen so low?! How can these baseless accusations even merit suspicion?!

Just then, loud clapping drew the attention of those assembled. The headmaster stood with a fretful look on his face as he addressed Caerus's claims. "If you're so certain, then perhaps we should settle this not with the symposium's scores, but rather with a friendly duel."

A murmur ran through the audience, and soon voices began to shout in agreement. Within moments, a special exhibition match was arranged between Mira and Caerus. There would be an intermission so they could prepare, but everyone stayed glued to their seats. The audience didn't know what would come next, but no one wanted to risk missing the action.

"What a pain," muttered Mira, returning to slouch against the wall.

"I'm so sorry. You didn't sign up for this." Hinata bowed apologetically.

"I'm sorry to have dragged you into this as well," said the headmaster, an unexpected interloper in the conversation. He wore charcoal-gray robes, and his brow was furrowed in irritation. "It was the only hope I had of regaining any semblance of order."

After a moment of surprise, Hinata and the other representatives stood to attention and bowed. He gave a slight bow in return and then turned his gaze to Mira.

"May I ask you to endure just a bit more?" he said with a pained smile.

Mira huffed. "Well, why not?"

"Thank you." With that, he returned to his place in the audience.

Though he could not say it publicly, the headmaster despised the current state of the symposiums. The recent slump in performances and the preponderance of noble children with no love for the magical arts ate at his soul. But the aristocrats who financed the school were numerous and influential—it was hard to deny their sons and daughters enrollment. More and more young adults emerged from the academy with no knowledge of the Age of Strife and without the skills to cope with such hardships should those times return.

But for the headmaster and some of his older peers, Mira's performance had been like a window into the glory of the past. It was as if they'd returned to the times of yore, when all Nine Wise Men roamed the land. Having seen her only once, he knew she outstripped the competition. Even if he didn't know where she came from.

She matches the description. And that power...

There had been rumors that Danblf's pupil had arrived in the kingdom. What if...? This was the perfect opportunity to find out. Whoever she was, he thought this might be a way to shake the academy out of the complacent status quo. To restore the true mages of Alcait—worthy souls who defended the kingdom against human and demon alike—they would have to destroy Caerus, the decadent modern mage...metaphorically speaking, anyway. He wanted the people to see the potential that *real* magicians could have.

"Take him down a peg!"

"And then take him down another for me too, if you would."

"I've got this," Mira replied as the other representatives filed out, offering her words of encouragement as they went by. It seemed she wasn't the only one who had a score to settle with Caerus; what's more, their departments' reputations were on the line. They could tell that Mira was no ordinary mage, and Caerus would have been able to determine the same, had he not been blinded by pride.

A moment later, preparation time was over, and Mira stepped into the ring. The two combatants faced each other in the center of the arena. The emcee stood between them to serve as referee and explain the rules of the bout. The fight would be a fair one. Victory would be decided by surrender or his decision that a combatant was unable or unwilling to continue. No life-threatening attacks would be permitted. They seemed to be fairly standard tournament rules.

"Could someone please keep an eye on Professor Hinata?" Caerus said. "I wouldn't want her to cheat again."

This comment had been secretly planned during the break. His attendant volunteered himself and moved to stand beside the feline summoner. If she

moved even a little bit, he would immediately cry foul.

It's all over now, Caerus thought. Now to just wait for the right moment, and victory is mine. I don't know what they were thinking, but these summoners need to be put back in their place.

He glanced at his attendant, who gave a small nod.

Caerus had secretly acquired magical Chains of Binding. Just before he defeated Mira (and assuredly, he *would* defeat Mira), he would ensnare himself. His attendant would accuse Hinata of cheating, claiming that Hinata interfered just as Mira was about to lose. His eyes darkened as he imagined completely crushing his foe and ruining the discipline of summoning forever in a single afternoon.

"The exhibition match will now begin. Both contestants, please bow."

Caerus swept into a graceful bow. Mira, taking a page from Leticia's book, grasped the edges of her skirt and curtsied. The audience gasped and buzzed scandalously. Danblf had always respected formalities such as bowing prior to a duel or a match. But Mira didn't quite know if there were different expectations for men and women. Mimicking Leticia seemed to be a safe bet, but she didn't yet understand the perils of curtsying in a miniskirt.

The emcee glanced at the pair, then stepped back an appropriate distance, raising his right hand high.

"Ready... Begin!"

Caerus leapt backward, pouring mana into both hands as he raised them overhead. He'd give the audience the show they wanted. He would embody the grandeur of sorcery and destroy the lowly art of summoning.

"Host of flames soaring through the sky, obey your mast—hrk?!" In the blink of an eye, he found himself surrounded by six Dark Knights, each tickling his throat with a jet-black blade. "What?!"

A shiver ran through the audience. It had all happened so quickly that it was impossible to grasp; not even those with a full view of the arena had witnessed it. Where was the prep work for Mira's spell? The gathering of mana? The chanting?

Caerus had been gathering his mana when the magic circles had appeared instantly and six Dark Knights surrounded him. Anyone who had the misfortune to blink simply saw six black blades appear from nowhere, holding steady in a ring around Caerus's neck. No one had seen any sign of prep work from Mira.

What...what is this? What's going on here?! Where did they come from?! This must be Hinata's doing! Caerus thought. He turned his head as far as he dared to glare at Hinata, but all he saw was her shocked stare and his own attendant shaking their head frantically. *Damn it! What the hell?! What did that brat do?!* He turned his eyes back on Mira, but she ignored him and made her way over to the frozen emcee.

"Good enough?" she asked, poking him in the cheek.

"The winner!" he shouted, shaking himself out of a daze and raising her right hand. "The representative for the Department of Evocation!"

There was sparse applause as his voice echoed around the arena. The younger members of the audience were still stunned, but the older contingent ate it up.

"This is ridiculous!" Caerus cried as Mira dismissed her Dark Knights.

"Caerus Verlan. Do you have a complaint?" The headmaster's calm voice boomed forth and silenced the clamor.

"That was impossible!" Caerus screamed, his composure and theatrics burning up in the fires of his rage. "There's no way she could summon *six* Dark Knights without prep! Have you been paying any sort of attention at these symposiums?! No summoner can do that! This is a ruse! A conspiracy! There's no other way! Where are your friends?! Show yourselves!"

Everyone in attendance watched as he ranted and raved in the center of the ring. The Dark Knights had been so powerful, it caused people's hairs to stand on end. Supposing that there even *were* conspirators, where would Hinata have recruited that many high-level summoners? With even a moment's thought, the conspiracy fell apart as paranoia.

"Cowards! Don't you know who I am?! I'm—"

In an instant, twenty Dark Knights filled the arena.

“Eeeek!” Caerus recoiled in horror and tripped over his own feet, sprawling to the floor as forty burning red eyes stared directly at him.

“Such power...” the headmaster murmured, awestruck. From the speed to the quantity to the coordination of her summons, Mira was leagues beyond the norm.

“Maybe now you understand?” Mira said, stroking her chin.

This wasn’t hard for her at all. Summoning required but a few simple steps:

First, affix the summoning location. It had to be in range of a sphere around the caster, the size of which correlated to their ability. or a mage of Mira’s skill, the radius was up to twenty meters from her.

Second, select the spirit to summon. This was when the caster decided what they would be summoning to the prior selected location. After deciding on the summons, the caster needed to charge it with mana. This readied the summon to be called upon at any time.

Third, call the summoned spirit forth.

Lastly, give instructions. After the summon was called upon, the caster had to govern their actions.

That was the standard process of summoning, at least as it applied to a standard summoner. Then again, Mira wasn’t exactly a *standard summoner*. Mira took the technique a step further with her simultaneous summonings, during which she affixed multiple summoning locations while at the same time summoning multiple spirits. Imagine being instantly surrounded by Dark Knights with their blades bearing down on you, and you’ll understand the menace.

Simplification of the casting processes was the key that opened the door to mastery in any school of magic. Those who could do it naturally were rare, and those who wanted to had to first break their own understanding of the arts to grasp the phenomenon.

And those who had gone beyond mastery were the Nine Wise Men.

The headmaster stood and praised her feat. “Splendid!” The rest of the audience was jolted from their stupor, and soon the coliseum rang with

applause once more.

After the match, the judges tallied up the scores. Meanwhile, Caerus fled the arena along with his attendant. Mira received lavish congratulations from the other representatives. They were keen to find out just who she was and how she could do the things she did. Just as she was about to make her usual excuses, two newcomers entered the grounds.

One of them was an elf in a blue-and-black robe with glimmering blond hair that fell past his shoulders. “Well, looks like the symposium is already over,” he mused.

His companion was a young blonde girl wearing a red magical-girl-style hood and cape. “So it seems,” she said flatly.

The two made an eye-catching pair, but as they entered, there was a sudden shift in the arena’s atmosphere. The headmaster and professors rushed down to the coliseum floor while the rest of the audience gazed on nervously. Hinata and the representative for necromancy both looked at a loss for words. Mira seemed much less impressed.

“Hrmm! Well, if it isn’t Cleos.” she said, greeting the elf like an old friend.

He turned and smiled with surprise upon seeing her, then walked right over. “Mira! I heard you came back but I didn’t imagine I’d run into you here.” The acting Elder of the Tower of Evocation sketched a bow in greeting.

“Oh, do you two know each other?” asked the girl in the red hood, peeking out from behind Cleos. As she caught sight of Mira, she grinned and muttered, “How cute,” but her smile soon vanished.

She seemed familiar, and Mira looked to Cleos for answers.

“Ah, right, I don’t believe you two were properly introduced before. Mira, this is one of my fellow acting Elders: Miss Amarette, keeper of the Tower of Necromancy. Amarette, this is Mira, the girl I told you about.”

Hinata and the other representatives sat stunned, watching the exchange. How could such powerful people chat so casually?

“Oh, my, this is her? A pleasure to meet you. As he said, I’m Amarette.”

“Mira.”

Amarette took a step forward and gave a slight nod of the head. She then moved even closer and inspected Mira’s outfit. She was only slightly taller than Mira herself. “Oh, this is splendid work. Would you mind telling me where you had them made?”

She stooped a little as she stared at Mira’s technomancy robes, devouring them with her eyes as the rest of her face remained blank. Clearly, she was also a fan of magical-girl styling. It was little wonder that she took interest in the sleek and elegant design of Mira’s new outfit.

“This was made by Lily and...well, the entire palace maid corps.”

“Lily, a palace maid? Hmm. I’ll have to make inquiries. Thank you, Miss Mira; that is good to know.” Amarette looked back up with a small smile before walking off toward the headmaster and the professors who had been waiting for a chance to speak.

“I suppose I must go say hello as well,” said Cleos with an apologetic smile. “Oh, but there are some things I’d like to go over with you. If you could make time for me later, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure, why not. I have a few questions for you too.”

Cleos trailed after Amarette. The headmaster had already approached the petite necromancer, and the two were engaged in conversation.

“Wh-what’s going on here?!” demanded Hinata. Having shaken off her shock for the umpteenth time that day, she lunged at Mira for answers. “How are you so close with Master Cleos?!”

None of the other representatives made a move to stop her. They all wanted to know the same thing.

“We’ve met before. It’s not that big of a deal. Why didn’t any of the rest of you say hello?”

Hinata’s cat ears popped up, and the rest of the group jolted. In their surprise, they had completely forgotten. Mortified, they scurried off toward the headmaster.

Mira watched them go and sighed as she pulled out an apple au lait. It wasn't often that the pair dropped in on a symposium, but circumstances had afforded them the opportunity. Cleos had been returning a prospective summoner to the academy, and Amarette had just finished some business at the palace before coming to the academy to check on a few things. The sudden appearance of the VIPs caused a brief commotion, but the score tallying was completed soon after. Summoning took first place with the highest performance score in history.

With awe and relief washing over all involved, the Spell Symposium was adjourned.

Mira found herself relaxing on a sofa in the academy's guest room along with a happy-looking Cleos and an expressionless Amarette sitting across from her. At her side, looking trapped and bewildered, was Hinata.

How? How can Mira be so brazen? Hinata wondered. She was a professor at a prestigious academy, yet the two sitting across from her were still leagues above her in status. Just making eye contact felt discourteous. She wondered if she should throw herself prostrate before them. Taking a teacup in her trembling hands, she lifted it to her lips.

"Hot!" The herbal tea was freshly brewed, and she couldn't contain her squeal. Her ears and tail shot upright for a few moments before Mira calmly offered her a glass of ice water. "Thank you." Accepting the glass, she sipped the water to soothe her tongue. But then she remembered her current situation and glanced about in panic. Amarette was covering her mouth, but her eyes sparkled with humor.

"Are you all right, Miss Hinata?" asked Cleos with a gentle smile.

"I...I'm fined." Hinata's ears shot up once more as she fumbled her words. Her jaw dropped in horror.

Mira snagged one of the cookies from the table and popped it into Hinata's open mouth. "Come on, Hinata. Why are you so nervous?"

"Mrph..." She scarfed down the cookie and chased it with a gulp of water. "I

should be asking why you are so at ease?!” A sliver of her tension had abated... but she was sitting across from two of the acting Elders! How could Mira be so calm?

“Well, I suppose I—” Mira stopped abruptly. She didn’t really have a good answer for that.

Frankly, she still wasn’t all that familiar with how class and rank had developed over the past thirty years, so it was a hard question to answer. She had a vague understanding. But her best friend was the king, and her former attendant was considered to be the most powerful summoner on the continent. It was sort of confusing. *I suppose I should figure this out someday.* Maybe it was best to just act casually.

“Miss Hinata, please don’t trouble yourself. How many times must I remind you that I’m only holding a temporary position and there’s no need for such formality?” Cleos said kindly and truthfully.

“But...but still.” She was at a loss for words. She’d been raised to show proper deference and respect; it wasn’t something she could just switch off.

Mira sighed. “Come on, Hinata. Are you going to make him repeat himself?”

Hinata’s eyes went wide as her thought processes screeched to a halt. A superior had asked her to do something countless times and she hadn’t done it? How shameful!

“I’m so sorry!” She fell prostrate on the floor for a moment before Mira took her by the collar and lifted her back to the sofa.

“What a shame.” Cleos chuckled, looking slightly downcast. “I’d *prefer* to talk about regular things. About classes, plans, anything. You’re fine speaking with Mira, so why not me?”

“Huh? What do you mean about speaking with Mira?” asked Hinata, her ears flattening.

What did Mira have to do with this? Tilting her head, she turned to look at the girl in question. She was definitely cute, and obviously an incredible summoner. Certainly, her magical power would afford her some status...

But she was also an adventurer. Adventurers typically valued their freedom and weren't associated with the bureaucracy of schools and the Silver Towers. Some top-ranked adventurers took positions where they wielded authority and responsibility, but those were few and far between.

Cleos glanced at Mira with a twinge of envy. "Well, she's probably more powerful than I am. She is Master Danblf's pupil, after all."

At that, Hinata's brain crashed.

Chapter 7

HALFWAY THROUGH the conversation, Hinata began to reboot. In the meantime, Mira discussed the current state of summoning education with Cleos. Seeing as she could make Blasting Stones, she recommended that they put some of the department's budget toward materials. Cleos heartily agreed.

As the catatonic cat woman listened to the conversation meander, Amarette grilled Mira regarding the technomancy robes. Mira answered in as much detail as she could, explaining the benefits provided by Mobility Stones and Magic Stones. The necromantic Elder's eyes lit up, and she stared covetously at the outfit until Mira said she'd check with Lily to see if another set could be made for Amarette.

Hinata couldn't bring herself to butt into a conversation between Danblf's pupil and two of the acting Elders, so she just remained quiet and tried to make sense of the situation.

She's Master Danblf's pupil?! I didn't know he'd taken one! But those spells! Besides, Master Cleos wouldn't lie. Oh! Is that why Master Danblf secluded himself? Was he focusing his efforts on training his disciple? Hang on—I think they just decided what to do with my department's budget! Oh, well, we only got it thanks to Mira's help anyway... I should probably show her more respect. But Master Cleos doesn't use a title for her. Then again, he's Master Cleos. So maybe Mistress Mira? I dunno... Maybe it's because of how she talks. Always so headstrong! And now it looks like Mistress Amarette is really into magical-girl fashion? I mean, it is super cute. But Mira's—I mean, Mistress Mira's—clothes seem slightly different. Are they the same style? Maybe I could pull it off... No, it wouldn't suit me. Wait. WHAT AM I EVEN DOING HERE?!

Cleos may have said he was only an acting Elder, but during the Defense of the Three Great Kingdoms just ten years ago, he and Luminaria were the strongest forces on the battlefield. According to him, the little girl sitting next to her on the sofa held even more power than that. Considering the display earlier that evening, she couldn't even argue.

She was surrounded by three world-class powerhouses. How in the world was

she supposed to stay calm? As she tuned back into the conversation, Mira and Cleos moved on to discussing the training of new summoners and the difficulties in acquiring their first summoning contracts.

“Hrmm, I suppose I should refine more enhancement gear to up the number of students being trained at the same time.”

“I agree. With the growing number of hopefuls and only one set to share, it’s taking quite some time. I did try collecting various types of gear before, but it wasn’t that powerful. We can’t put the students in harm’s way, and the equipment you gave me before makes it safe.”

“Oho, do the items you gathered augment abilities?”

“Strength and stamina, mostly. But the effect was weak enough that there was still a danger.”

“I see. I might be able to do something about that.” Mira pondered for a moment. “Even if the gear you collected only provides a small benefit, with enough pieces, I can refine and consolidate the effect.”

“Really?!”

“Leave it to me.”

Hinata continued to watch on, feeling detached from the world around her.

Leaving the guest room, the four made their way through the academy to the Department of Evocation’s storeroom. The academy’s intricate lighting arrangements and furnishings seemed more suited to an aristocrat’s mansion than a school building. As Mira learned about the history of the academy from Cleos and Amarette, she asked about the various aspects that seemed at odds with her own university experience. Hinata trailed nervously behind.

Students hastily took up positions along the hallways and bowed as they passed, after which Cleos would apologize for disturbing them. It was little wonder that he’d become a beloved and respected figure.

But that wasn’t limited solely to him. While each of the acting Elders was unique, all were humble. None of them exploited their position for selfish

desires. This often put them at odds with some of the nobility, who would try to control the Elders' words and actions or compare them against their own reputations. Thankfully, those nobles were a tiny minority, and most of Alcait's upper class were honorable.

As the group passed by, they left gossiping students in their wake.

"I know Professor Hinata, but who was that other girl?"

"Wow, she was cute!"

"I know! Mistress Amarette is a cutie, but that girl was *ah-dorable*."

"But who is she?"

The speculations grew fast and furious. Cleos's illegitimate child? Amarette's younger sister? A new student? A tower researcher? Amarette's fellow magical girl? The students amused themselves by coming up with all sorts of outlandish theories.

Amid the various storerooms in the basement, Cleos drew to a halt before a somewhat lonely looking door. Hinata produced a key she'd borrowed from the staff room, and a moment later, the door swung open. The faint scent of metal and paper hung in the air. The room was well kept, with little dust or clutter—Hinata had a lot of free time to keep things cleaned and organized these days.

"Miss Hinata, can you please pull out those accessories I sent?"

"Of course! It'll just take a moment." Back and tail stiff, she charged into one corner of the storeroom. Meanwhile, Cleos unfolded a portable refining table in the center.

A few moments later, Hinata returned carrying a box in both hands, saying, "Thank you for waiting." She placed it carefully on the table.

Inside were countless rings, necklaces, and other trinkets. The materials were standard, but they seemed to hide a secret power.

Cleos scanned the shelves. "We'll also need...these." He snagged a small bag and emptied it out on the table. Inside were gemstones: turquoise, moonstones, crystals, and so on. Necessary materials for refining.

“Hrmm, let’s get this taken care of, shall we? Can I use all of these?”

“Absolutely.”

With Cleos’s blessing, Mira laid the gems out across the refining table and got to work. Despite having seen the spectacle during the demonstration of the Accord Cannon, Cleos and Amarette couldn’t help but stare in admiration. Seeing it for the first time, Hinata could barely process what she was witnessing. She had been taught that refining was a slow and deliberate process. It might take thirty minutes to transform several gems into a single Refining Stone.

Before she could finish the thought, Mira had processed the gems into Refining Stones and moved on to the next task. She was now extracting the weak enhancement effects from the accessories and accumulating them within the refined gemstones to create Magic Stones, each with a single condensed power boost. The individual efficiency didn’t improve but by repeating the process the overall effect was increased. As she concentrated the effects from a dozen or so necklaces into a single Magic Stone, the process turned the accessories into a small pile of sand.

Is this...refining?! I’ve seen it before in practice, but this is so different! Hinata looked on in wonder. *That pile of sand just keeps growing and growing... Oh!*

“I-I’ll do that,” Hinata said, sweeping in to remove the sand pile just as she saw Cleos leaning forward to do it himself.

His shoulders slumped. “I’ve been replaced,” he muttered.

Amarette admonished him quietly. “Think of Miss Hinata’s feelings.”

Long used to being Danblf’s attendant, Cleos often found himself jumping in to do menial tasks—much to the chagrin and embarrassment of his subordinates. This wasn’t the first time Amarette had reminded him of this, but he still found it difficult to fight the urge.

Half an hour later, all the accessories had been broken down into sand, and twelve Magic Stones sat on the table, holding their condensed effects.

“That truly is amazing,” Cleos said.

“Indeed, it is,” Amarette agreed.

Hinata struggled to comprehend how the two of them could react so calmly when witnessing such a wondrous feat.

“These are for strength; these for stamina,” Mira said. “Now we just need jewelry that can withstand the power, and we’re set.”

“Jewelry, hmm? You know, I think we had something somewhere around here...” Cleos fished through the storeroom shelves, digging through boxes of metal and assorted work tools. A pile formed around his feet, and finally, he resurfaced with a small box plucked from the very back.

It was about the size of two hands put together. Placing it on the table, he opened the lid to reveal an unadorned ring and necklace set. He’d created them years ago when he was trying to develop new ways to learn summoning techniques. A failure, they’d been consigned to this shelf.

Now their time had come. The true art of refining wasn’t just in extracting effects from objects, but also in reintroducing them.

“Not very glamorous, but they are pure gold, so it should make for a decent foundation.”

Gold had a high tolerance for taking on additional effects through refining, making it a valuable material beyond its glint and glitter.

“Hrmm, indeed. Let’s put them together.”

Taking the ring and the necklace, Mira carefully began work, step by step. As the condensed effects were transferred to the jewelry, the Magic Stones lost their color and crumbled into dust. The process continued smoothly, and after a dozen transfers, the refined equipment was complete.

“Thank you, Mira! These will help even more hopefuls acquire their contracts! Thank you so much!” Cleos smiled widely and picked up the new gear.

This was also great news for Hinata. She may not have fully comprehended everything she just saw, but she definitely understood that the enhancement gear meant more students would be coming her way. “As the summoning professor, I would also like to offer you my sincerest gratitude, Mistress Mira.”

“Hinata, what’s wrong? You’re talking weird.”

“Why, nothing at all. I am quite all right.” After the shocking revelation that Mira was Danblf’s pupil, Hinata couldn’t help but show a little respect.

“Well, I might be to blame for this,” muttered Cleos with a sheepish grin.

“Hrmm.” Mira frowned with a furrowed brow. “Listen up: I don’t have some fancy title like those two. I’m just an adventurer. I’ve no need for any of that pomp and circumstance,” Mira said, brow furrowed, and Hinata’s mind went swirling back—back to the many times that Cleos had asked her not to stand on formality, and how foolish she’d been not to change.

After a moment mentally wrestling with herself, Hinata’s mouth slowly opened to speak.

“Um, M-Mira...?”

Mira smiled. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. I’ll do right by the students!” Hinata exclaimed as the tension drained from her and her ears stood up straight. Perhaps due to her nature as a teacher, Hinata had a weakness for a child’s smiling face.

“Well, I couldn’t sit by and ignore what was going on. Any time you need help, you make sure to ask.” The future of summoning was on the line, after all.

Whether she knew it or not, Hinata had just forged a crucially important relationship in the school’s basement.

“So Mira, what are your plans after this?” Cleos asked as the group climbed the stairs.

Mira thought back over the symposium. No doubt some of the spells presented were unknown to her after a thirty-year absence. A few had different effects than she remembered, and it was clear that the representatives still had room to grow in their abilities. She wanted to know more.

“If possible, I’d like to take a look around the academy.”

Delighted, Cleos prepared to lead the tour himself. “Well, then, I—” he began, then stopped when he remembered Amarette’s advice. “Say, Miss Hinata...you don’t have classes today, do you? Can I ask you to give Mira a tour?”

Hinata beamed at the direct request for her assistance. Even though Cleos's recruitment efforts were causing the program to expand, there were still only enough students to warrant holding classes a couple of times a week. Hinata had plenty of time on her hands.

"Of course, I'd love to!" Her cat ears perked up with pride.

Mira and Hinata parted ways with the two acting Elders on the first floor. Cleos only left after he'd bowed and thanked Mira a dozen times. Amarette departed with a final "Pleasure meeting you" and a reminder to mention her to Lily as she headed off to another building on campus. After seeing them off with a bow of her own, Hinata straightened up and turned to Mira excitedly.

"What would you like to see? We can go anywhere!"

Watching Hinata's ears and tail twitch this way and that, Mira considered her options. "I'd like to see some practical spellcasting, like a mock battle or something."

"Battle practice, huh? There should be some drills happening. But this time of day, it'll be sorcery."

"Oho, that's fine. Lead the way."

She thought of Caerus. Putting aside his personality, his spells *were* quite unique. A lot had changed in the years she had missed. Interest piqued, she signaled she was ready to head off.

"All right, this way," Hinata said.

They passed through the first floor of the Advanced Studies Department, making their way out of the rear exit and crossing a courtyard to a building half the size of the big three. If anything, it resembled a gymnasium. The faint sound of voices and the roar of spell-fire echoed from within.

Entering through the main doors, they found themselves in a lobby that felt like an event space. There was simple seating and even a concession stand, where a few students were wiping away sweat and purchasing drinks.

"Oh, it's Professor Hinata. How can we help you?" a middle-aged man called to them from the back of the lobby. He looked slightly nervous as he

approached. “I wasn’t aware that the Department of Evocation had also booked time today.”

But something else caught Mira’s attention.

A tracksuit. He’s wearing an actual tracksuit! I suppose that is the best clothing to exercise in.

Sure enough, he was wearing a blue tracksuit—perfect for exercise, lounging, or even going shopping. It was absurd! Even so, Mira was stunned by just how...*practical* it was.

“Ah, Professor Siegfried. How’s your class? We haven’t booked any time; I’m just showing Mira around the academy.”

He briefly glanced at the other summoner. “Oh, that’s very kind of you.”

A noble name like “Siegfried,” and he’s here in a tracksuit...

The incongruity struck a chord with Mira, and she had to turn away, holding in a giggle.

“I know my name is a bit of a mouthful. You can just call me Sig,” he told Hinata, his voice gentle.

“So you’ve said, but you’re still my superior here on campus,” Hinata modestly replied. It seemed that the battle between familiarity and formality would not be decided today.

His shoulders drooped, and he looked again at Mira, who was looking around the lobby. “Right, a tour, huh? Well, today we’re doing sorcery training drills, as you can see. It might be a bit dangerous for a child, though.”

It was clear he wasn’t boasting but rather giving an earnest warning. The art of sorcery consisted of aggressive techniques and could be dangerous for unwary onlookers, especially if the casters were students without full control of their abilities. Certainly not a threat to Mira, but her adorable, innocent looks were deceiving.

“Don’t worry about that,” Hinata said confidently. “Mira here is pretty strong.”

A light appeared in Siegfried’s eyes. “Oh! So this must be the last-minute

replacement who took first place.” Stepping over to Mira, he extended a hand. “Pleased to meet you, Mira. I’m Siegfried, a professor in the Department of Sorcery. It was a shame we lost today, but you did a fantastic job.”

“Heh—hrmm! It was nothing special.” Mira swallowed a laugh as she shook his hand. The juxtaposition of a sorcerer in a tracksuit was still too much.

She was a bit confused by the polite greeting, considering she was the one who had knocked sorcery down a peg, but the professor seemed happy as could be. He waved his hands in the air as he turned back to Hinata.

“Congratulations to you too, Professor Hinata! And Master Cleos as well! I know he’s putting in a lot of work. It’s time for summoning to shine!”

“Oh, thank you very much.” Hinata smiled, and Siegfried blushed bright red.

Hinata was too discombobulated by the day’s events to notice that he had feelings for her—but Mira could tell just by watching. That was why he was happy to have lost, why he smiled so brightly. It must have hurt watching the person he cared for sink deeper into depression with each and every passing symposium.

“Well, then, I guess we don’t have to worry about the danger,” Siegfried said.

“Thank you very much, Professor *Siegfried*.” Hinata bowed and led Mira through the building to the training area.

He turned and watched her go, letting out a great sigh of disappointment.

Chapter 8

“O_{HO}, look at them go!”

The passion and effort of the students—not to mention the actual heat from the spells—added to the temperature in the training room. Overflowing with youthful vitality, the students paired off and skirmished to simulate actual combat.

Mira was getting excited as she watched from one corner of the gym. Sorcerer versus sorcerer. Flashes of light and flame. Wind rushing through the air as earthen walls rose from the ground. This was something that could only ever be seen at an institute for magic.

To Hinata, it was another day at the office. As she watched Mira lose herself in the action, her face clouded a little. She wondered what kind of life Mira had as Danblf’s pupil. Training under a legendary hero—and to have reached such impossible standards at her young age!—was no easy task. Surely, she must have spent all her time training and never had time to relax and play.

No wonder she was peeking at the school grounds... But she’s free now! I’ll show her all sorts of ways to have fun. Filled with a new sense of purpose, Hinata turned her eyes back to the training sessions, tenderness and renewed determination driving away her momentary gloom.

While Hinata was in her own little world of inspiration, Mira focused on how the students cast their spells. They were practicing magical feints. When they cast a fireball, it either burst into a large flame or suddenly sputtered and disappeared. Students cast numerous copies of their fireballs, hiding the actual shot among them—or used the disappearing fireballs to keep their opponent in check, controlling their movements. Sometimes, they mixed up the elements, throwing off their opponent’s aim. Casting a fireball to attack a target was an incredibly simple spell and one of the basic foundations of sorcery, but Mira had never seen one that fizzled like that.

“Say, Hinata. Is that all the Flame spell?” Mira asked, turning to Hinata to find the miao woman looking back with a strange twinkle in her eye.

“It is.” She nodded. “In training exercises like this, it’s often best to master the basics.” Due to her lack of summoning classes, she often helped with other departments and had learned quite a bit about every discipline.

Mira revisited her earlier assumptions, and something stuck out to her as strange. “But some disappear and some explode. Aren’t those two different techniques?”

Hinata tilted her head in contemplation, then responded, “Do you know the basic casting procedures for sorcery?”

“Hmmm. Select, target, consume, cast.” These were the fundamentals of sorcery, slightly different from the method used for summoning. First, the sorcerer had to select which spell to use. Then, they designated a target. This was followed by consuming the required mana. Lastly, they cast the spell. Higher-level spells required chanting, but *Flame* was a basic technique.

“Wow, so you know about sorcery as well as summoning! That’s exactly right. The fireballs that explode were cast normally, but the disappearing ones occur when not enough mana is consumed. If you try to cast without enough mana, they simply fizzle out, but it makes for an effective feint. It also consumes less mana and doesn’t require as much time to cast.” Hinata was gratified that she could finally do something teacherly.

“I see. I didn’t know you could do that!” Mira said, impressed by the explanation. Back in the game, it was all or nothing. You couldn’t cast a spell without enough mana, end of story. But now, with the world turned real, it seemed that rule no longer applied. That naturally invited exploration of the possibilities. “So what happens if you try to summon a spirit without enough mana?” she asked, eyes gleaming with anticipation.

Hinata’s ears flattened and her face clouded over as she looked off with a blank stare. “The head... An arm... A leg... Part of it appears, and then it just vanishes. That’s it. With proper timing, it might serve as a shield, but...that’s all you get from summoning with too little mana.”

“Hmmm. Is that so?” Mira’s head drooped in disappointment. Still, it was a new technique worth trying. To have an idea of how it felt to use less mana, Mira began to summon a Dark Knight.

Hrmm, half. Or maybe just a quarter.

Moving slightly away she focused on an open area.

[Evocation: Dark Knight]

Mira went through the standard steps but pictured herself using less mana. In response, a smaller-than-usual magic circle popped into being, and just the head of the Dark Knight appeared. As fearsome as ever, its eyes met Hinata's, and she let out a small shriek before the head disappeared.

So that's what reduced mana consumption feels like. Not too hard.

After the first test, she had an idea of the process. It was quite like using a different technique with a lesser mana requirement, and to Mira, who had mastered countless skills, it was another weapon in her arsenal. With that under her belt, it was time to explore other possibilities. Her curiosity could not be contained. Could she summon a *specific* body part?

[Evocation: Dark Knight]

This time, just the right arm of the Dark Knight appeared from the small magic circle, black greatsword in hand. Then it vanished a few moments later.

Hrmm, that seemed to work. Now, then...

"Hinata, this next one might be dangerous. Stand back a little."

"O-oh, sure."

Even just a part of Mira's Dark Knight was clearly powerful, and Hinata nervously moved back not just a little, but a lot. Taking the previous results into account, Mira targeted an open area and molded her mana.

[Evocation: Dark Knight]

Like before, the arm holding the sword appeared from the magic circle, but this time, it swung the sword in a wide arc.

“What?!” Hinata blurted. She watched the sword stab into the ground before it and the arm vanished without a trace.

“Hrmm, great success!” Mira stroked her chin with her fingers, satisfied with the results.

Hinata had stumbled back at the outrageous sight, but now she gawked at where the black arm had been. The large gouge in the floor was proof that it hadn’t been her imagination.

She knew the steps for summoning: affix the location, choose the summon, spend the mana, and cast. That was how Dark Knights and other such beings were summoned. But that only made summoned spirits appear; they still needed to be given instructions if the caster expected them to be useful. If the mana was reduced, the summoned form would disappear before the caster could instruct it, which is why the technique was useless. Commanding spirits made the discipline of summoning unique, and without it, there wasn’t much point in calling one forth.

But Mira was different. She’d somehow condensed the summoning process to a single action, instructing the Dark Knight *before* it appeared and allowing just the arm to complete an attack the moment it was summoned.

“Mira, what was that?!” shouted Hinata as she ran up with a shocked expression.

Mira warned, “Hold that thought. I’m not done yet.” Then she turned back to the open area.

[Evocation: Dark Knight]

The next scenario pushed Hinata’s understanding of technique closer to the breaking point. This time, six arms all appeared in a circle, swinging their swords

at the same central point. A small cloud of dust blasted up from the force of the impact before the arms vanished, leaving behind a slightly larger crater.

Hinata wasn't the only one left speechless—the sorcery students had stopped their practice to gape at Mira's spontaneous experiments. The first floating head had been a distracting novelty, but the succession of wonders kept them entranced. This must be the girl who took first at the symposium, they realized. Hinata being with her only confirmed their suspicions.

They weren't happy that sorcery had come in second, but most were secretly glad that Caerus had lost. His arrogance was tiring, even to his fellow sorcerers. And this adorable little girl was the one who had dealt him the blow. Whether she realized it or not, Mira's reputation was soaring.

At present, Mira was so impressed with the results of her little experiment that she was making mental notes to expand it into a full-blown research project.

With a bit more testing, I could probably use this in actual combat. Hmmm, modulating mana consumption, eh? With the game regulations out the window, this opens a lot of new doors. This demands further testing.

Returning her attention to the students to see what other tricks she might pick up, she met their gazes and involuntarily took a step back. Suddenly aware that she was the center of attention, she spun on her heels and fled the facility.

The students watched Mira go in a daze, and Siegfried took the opportunity to light a fire beneath them. He issued an order to his students: next month, they would defeat Mira and regain first place! Some of his pupils had their doubts. Were the things they'd just seen even summoning techniques? How could they compete with that?!

Nevertheless, they returned to their training. At the very least, they had to work hard to keep improving, and there was never enough time. They wouldn't give in easily, and Siegfried's voice inspired them to delve right back into their training.

This was how the Department of Sorcery was supposed to be. Guided by Luminaria, they marched after her example. When they witnessed wonders, it only filled them with boundless willpower and determination.

After fleeing the training grounds, Hinata continued to take Mira around the campus to see what school life was like for mages.

The academy held the collective knowledge of the entire continent, and along with teaching magic, it also offered courses in general education, battle techniques, and industrial sciences. Students could choose classes that suited them, then move on to specialized studies. The well-rounded results proved that the academy was the best educational institution for anyone who aspired to be a mage.

Research to create new spells was constant and ongoing. There were now spells that Mira had never seen, as well as new techniques of combining existing spells together. She learned that the spells Caerus had performed were called composite spells, which were a combination of existing spells with new visual effects designed to enhance their appearance.

Mira assaulted Hinata with question after question, her eyes shining as she learned about the current state of magic. She had so many questions on her mind. *What's that? What's this? How do I...? What if I...?* This only kindled Hinata's passion for teaching, and she cheerfully shared all the knowledge she had gained from helping the other departments. As the pair visited each department, Hinata proudly listed their achievements.

The Department of Sorcery was eagerly working on crafting composite spells. Meanwhile, the Department of the Holy was preparing for a class pilgrimage. The students would travel the land learning the sacred arts and paying homage at the temples of the gods. Unfortunately, the Department of Divination was facing a shortage of the mystic leaves they needed for their talismans. Advancement to the middle and upper levels of study had been greatly hindered.

As for the Department of Exorcism, it had developed a holy water gun with technomancy; it used air pressure to spray holy water at a target from long range. The Department of Demonology had discovered that a mage's assimilation of demonic techniques was controlled not just by their aptitude, but also their personality. Research was being done to determine the level of

influence.

The Department of Necromancy was developing and creating new useful tools, such as stone figures that could carry items. As soon as students entered the Department of Immortality, they underwent intensive martial arts training. As a result, everyone there was fit and toned, and they were trying to figure out how to incorporate weaponry into their classically bare-handed techniques. Around this time, the Department of the Ethereal was researching spells that would manipulate the weather and artificial lights that allowed for improved growth of crops.

Lastly, there was the Department of Evocation. Cleos was recruiting new summoning hopefuls, day after day. One by one, he took them out into the field to forge their first summoning contracts.

By the time they finished making their way around the school, after-school activities had begun, and the sky was dyed a crimson hue. In the schoolyard, athletic students sweated as they ran toward their dreams. Other students indulged in their interests in club rooms tinged by the setting sun.

“Well, we couldn’t see everything in one day, but what did you think?”

“I had a marvelous time. Thank you, Hinata,” Mira replied with a satisfied smile.

“Oh, no, thank *you* for helping with the symposium. Here, this is for you.” Hinata held out a silver ring.

Mira reached out and gently closed Hinata’s hand. “I did it for the future of summoning. That’s all the reward I need.”

“But I asked you to help.”

Mira’s smile turned tender. “Then why don’t you give me another tour of the school when we have the chance? There’s still so much to see.”

Hinata thought back to how Mira acted on their tour, then to their first meeting and how Mira looked as she peeked through the gates of the academy.

“All right, leave it to me! I’ll show you everything we’ve got!” With her cat ears standing at attention, Hinata decided that the next time Mira visited, she’d

make sure to get a permit so that she could show Mira all the areas that were normally off-limits.

“Well, this is it, then.”

“Goodbye, Mira. I’m here whenever you want to visit.”

After that, Mira walked off through the middle of the schoolyard.

Hinata watched her go and whispered, “Thank you,” before she regained her vigor and took off running toward the Department of Evocation. Thanks to the new enhancement gear, things would only be getting busier. And that meant it was time to start preparing. What better way to show her gratitude for what Mira had done?

She was so inspired as she sprinted down the hallway that she completely missed Siegfried’s invitation to join him for dinner.

Mira watched the students toiling away in the schoolyard before turning to look up at the red-streaked sky. She’d only intended to take a quick look at the school, but one thing led to another, and now almost the entire day was gone. It was almost dark, too late to go sightseeing anywhere else.

As she passed through the gate and wondered what to do with herself, a familiar figure jogged past, then stopped and turned around.

It was Amarette in her red-hooded cape. “Oh, you’re still here.” She’d just finished her business at the academy and was also on her way out.

“Hmmm, I suppose I am.”

Amarette leaned forward, bringing her face close to Mira’s and ignoring the girl’s slightly startled expression.

“By the way, Miss Mira. Do you make a habit of not wearing underclothes?” she asked, staring at Mira’s chest. Then she locked eyes with Mira. “Or is that your preference?”

Reaching out, Amarette flipped up the hem of Mira’s skirt, sending ripples of panic through the few students nearby. The two experienced mages paid them no mind.

“You *are* wearing something down here, I see.” With a slightly remorseful smile, Amarette stood back up, then looked to her for an explanation.

“I couldn’t figure out how to get the bra on,” Mira replied with a shrug, and the unexpected response brought a grin to Amarette’s face.

“That explains it! I suppose I’ll have to teach you.” As she spoke, she moved to undo Mira’s buttons, and the summoner hurriedly stopped her hands.

“What are you doing?!”

“Just as I said, teaching you. I’ll take mine off, and then you can watch as I put it back on.”

There was no way Mira could agree to that without staring directly at Amarette’s breasts. Well, that might not be so bad, but this was definitely not the time or place for it. Mira’s sense of decorum did not include exhibitionism.

Mira swore that she’d ask Lily to teach her next time, and that somehow appeased Amarette.

“Please don’t forget the other matter as well,” the necromancer added. She desired nothing more than the palace maid corps to weave her very own deluxe magical-girl outfit.

Mira brushed it off. “I know, I know.”

Looking pleased, Amarette cast Necromantic Arts: Rock Bear, and a giant bear made entirely of stone took shape in the street.

“Well, then, until next we meet,” Amarette said. With that, she jumped on the back of her bear and spurred it onward. The stony creature effortlessly made its way through the traffic. It didn’t seem to cause any particular panic among the townsfolk, but it certainly attracted attention.

Mira stood there, stunned, once again reminded of the stark differences between the game and reality. Just like Alfina and Leticia, everyone who had been an NPC was now free to live their lives as they saw fit.

People were accomplishing feats that weren’t possible back in the game. Watching Amarette go inspired Mira to try riding one of her own summons. Based on the crowd’s reaction, it seemed to be a relatively common occurrence

for necromancers to travel on their creations.

That would save me some walking.

No summons were intended to be mounts, but there were plenty that looked...rideable. Just as she went to file it under “needs more testing” in her mind, a thought occurred to her. People weren’t afraid—but riding a stone bear through the street had drawn everyone’s gaze. Mira hated being the center of attention, so she resolved to test the matter later in a more inconspicuous location.

Right, so what do I do now?

She had acquired a whole host of new knowledge and wanted to start internalizing it right away. Considering the hour, it was probably best to prioritize sleeping arrangements for the night. She *could* just return to the palace, but where was the fun in that? She was in a storybook world, and every fantasy story included staying at a random inn!

Spontaneously spending the night in an inn you happened upon in your travels—one of the joys of adventuring!

She needed to find someplace nice and ordinary, a standard inn that included a tavern and a place to stay. Somewhere like the Spring Flurry, the place where she’d said her goodbyes to the Écarlate Carillon, would be ideal. Up to this point, she’d only slept in her room in the tower, the guest room of the palace, a carriage intended for royalty, and the grandest hotel in all of Karanak. None of those could be considered normal in any sense of the word.

A casual conversation with the innkeeper, a meal in a bustling tavern, and a simple but comfortable bed—they were key aspects of any fantasy story. Mira was gripped by the yearning and ran out under the darkened sky in search of the most generic inn she could find.

Chapter 9

MIRA FOUND A SMALL INN not far from the academy. A typical wood-framed affair with a stone foundation, the inn was warm and welcoming despite its small size. The innkeeper was a middle-aged man who ran the establishment with his wife and two daughters.

Just as she'd hoped, the first floor was a tavern and the perfect place to find a meal. It was cozy, the food was excellent, and she even achieved her goal of having a short chat with the innkeeper. She sympathized with him a little, knowing the difficulties of one man up against three women, but the fellow wasn't about to spill his troubles to a girl who looked to be younger than his daughters.

The next morning, Mira awoke to the sounds of birds fluttering about the eaves of the inn, and as she slowly gained consciousness, she began to make her plans.

There are still so many places to see. For now...

Her mind replayed yesterday's events and lingered on the image of Amarette casually making her way down the street on the back of her rock bear. Mira felt herself growing excited—there were new possibilities, new endeavors she'd never tried before! Riding one of her summons was now her top priority.

Feeling proud that relieving herself was no longer a daunting task, she finished her morning routine before donning her technomancy robes and leaving her room. On her way down the stairs, a pleasing aroma tickled her nose, and she glanced into the tavern.

The place was packed—not just with her fellow guests, but with others who had come in off the street to enjoy breakfast. Amid the chaos, the sight of the family pulling together to make it all work filled her with warmth, and she smiled softly.

This inn went by two names: The Moonlight Pavilion and Nature's Villa. When Mira asked why the names were split, the innkeeper explained that the tavern

and inn were separate businesses, managed by him and his wife respectively. Their daughters helped with both.

Mira greeted the innkeeper as she took a seat at the counter. “You get busy early.”

“Oh, good morning, Miss Mira!” He smiled cheerfully and placed an unordered muscat au lait on the counter in front of her. “I suppose you’re right, but this is about the busiest it gets.”

“Hrmm, good morning,” she replied, glancing quizzically at him.

“You’re a cutie, so it’s on the house. Just don’t tell the missus or my daughters.” He took an exaggerated look around the tavern and grinned. Muscat au lait was his specialty, and last night, Mira ordered five in a row. Clearly he remembered when someone was a fan of his signature drink.

“Well, thank you.” Once she tilted the glass to her lips, her palate rejoiced in the flavor and acidity from the grapes along with the creamy sweetness of the milk.

Breakfast was a typical affair consisting of bread with strawberry jam, pumpkin stew, bacon, and eggs. Mid-meal, one of the innkeeper’s daughters swooped in to wipe a smear of jam from the corner of Mira’s mouth. Full and satisfied, she finished off her muscat au lait. Extravagant meals at the palace were well and good, but she much preferred filling, rustic fare.

After saying her goodbyes, Mira made her way through the city and headed toward the gatehouse leading to the countryside. She needed a large open area to conduct her experiments. The whole reason for trying to ride a summon was to reduce her travel time...and the best way to reduce travel time was to fly.

For that, she needed all the room she could get.

Half an hour later, she arrived at the defensive wall surrounding the city of Lunatic Lake. The massive metal gate was lowered every night and raised each morning, and even now it was only halfway open in its tall portcullis.

Mira stood, fidgeting and swaying as she listened to the rumble of the mechanism. Adventurers and merchants stood nearby, looking to leave town. Some stared slack-jawed, looking up at the gate. Others impatiently wondered

how long this was going to take.

Finally, the gate rose to the top, and the guards signaled to the waiting crowd. Traffic began to flow in both directions. Mira slipped in and left the city, walking until she could no longer see the outer walls. Then she turned off into a large meadow and walked some more.

This area was called Muscat Meadows and lay to the east of Lunatic Lake. As one might expect, numerous vineyards were planted across the low hills that surrounded the pastureland. The sweet smell of ripening grapes hung in the air, and Mira wandered until she came to a secluded area. A row of trees concealed her from the main road, and nearly two hours had passed since she'd departed the inn.

Mira nodded to herself. *This should be far enough to not raise any eyebrows.* She was well off the main thoroughfare, and there were trees all around. Summoning something conspicuous here shouldn't draw any attention. Suppressing a sudden rush of excitement, she waved her right hand with a flourish.

[Summoning Arts: Bound Arcana]

Four bindings appeared in the wake of her fingers as they passed through the air. Turning her hand, she converted the formation into the Mark of the Rosary. She began to chant:

Black, born from the depths of the earth, yearning for the light beyond.

White, raised high in the heavens, dreaming of the distant blue.

A bird, cutting cleanly through the crystal skies.

A dream, of conquerors etched into the wheel of time.

Longing surpassing ages.

Bound wings, clad in dreams.

Now, take to the skies, my beloved child.

Her words rang in the air, and the summoning circles glowed in response, rising and overlapping to form a halo resplendent against the sky. It grew, creating a gate that cut through the heavens with a great thunderclap. She called forth he who was draped in silver.

[Evocation: Imperial Dragon Eizenfald]

Billowing mana distorted the space surrounding the halo, and a trunk-thick tail lashed out from within. The tip gleamed like a burnished blade as two legs with great black claws emerged, followed by a body clad in silver scales. Arms, wings, and neck came forth, until two gleaming, golden dragon eyes turned to stare at Mira.

The halo shattered, and the ruler of the sky landed before her with a fearsome rumble. Leaning in close enough that she could feel the dragon's hot breath, the beast took in her form, and his jaws parted.

"Father. Or...should I say Mother? When did this happen?" A low, calm voice rumbled out as the dragon lifted his head. Despite his appearance, he was sometimes quite childish.

"Well, it's kind of a long story... I'd honestly prefer it if we just skipped it."

"As you desire, Fa—Mother. I'll question no more. I've always wanted a mother, anyway," he said, closing his eyes and nuzzling Mira like a child looking for affection.

"I-I see. Hmmm, very well."

Their relationship was its own tale, but it all started with an egg she found deep within a set of ruins in Dragon Valley. After considerable effort on Danblf's part, the egg hatched, revealing the imperial dragon that was now happily purring next to her.

She scrunched her eyebrows and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Life was full of surprises, and sometimes that included becoming a mother. Turning that thought aside, she looked up at the dragon with pride. He was a great beast

with a wingspan of over thirty meters. Fantasy lovers like herself longed to soar through the skies on the back of a dragon, and now that dream was about to come true. How could she not be excited?

“It’s been a long time, Eizenfald. Are you well?”

“Yes. Physically at least. I was terribly lonely without you, Mother. I feared you had forgotten me,” he replied sadly, rubbing his face against her as his body slumped.

“Look at you. Were you always this sensitive?” Mira asked, trying to stay upright as the dragon pushed against her. Eizenfald was always well behaved, but she didn’t remember him being quite so...*clingy*.

“You taught me that fathers were strict with their love, and only mothers were giving. So you wouldn’t spoil me. But now that you are Mother, your affection is permissible, is it not?”

“Erm...”

As she was finally knocked to the ground, Mira stared up at the sky and recalled old memories. It was true that Danblf had brought the dragon up quite harshly from a young age. It hadn’t been explicitly required, but he was always strict during their training sessions. It seemed like a meaningless choice in the game’s decision tree at the time, but clearly Eizenfald remembered. Now that he had Mira, he was determined to soak up the affection he’d been denied.

I guess I did say that... Hrmm, it was just roleplaying back then. Though I suppose I can’t go back on it now.

He was acting quite out of character for a creature called an Imperial Dragon. Mira smiled ruefully as she recalled a game screenshot taken by Luminaria titled “Wise Danblf and Majestic Eizenfald.” The dragon had his wings outstretched, before a moonlit tower.

“All this time, and he’s still a handful,” she muttered as she petted him. Then, out of nowhere, Eizenfald began to shine silver. “Hrmm, what’s this?”

Shielding her eyes with her hand, she squinted against the blinding light before it suddenly faded. Dropping her hand, she was faced with a young man with short silver hair. Good-looking wasn’t enough to do him justice—he was

positively *angelic*. Mira was stunned, and the man's innocent look shifted into a smile as he moved to hug her.

He was also completely naked.

"Mother! I can feel your love across my entire body." His deep, calm voice was immediately recognizable, and he hummed happily to himself.

Somehow, she managed to pull herself from his smothering embrace. "Is that you, Eizenfald...?"

"Of course it is, Mother!" he answered, beaming beautifully.

Dragons becoming human?! This really is a fantasy world. Does that mean there are others who can transform as well? I can't wait to find out! Her mind raced at this new development as she patted Eizenfald's head. He may have looked like an adult, but had the needs of a neglected child. *This is a bit awkward, though.*

Having a nude adult man snuggled up close to her was hardly appealing, and she cursed the choices of her past self. That said, she had put great care into raising him. She had a thirty-year absence to deal with, even if it wasn't her fault. For the moment, she would allow it and consider what would be best for the dragon's future.

After a thorough cuddle session, Mira decided it was time to get back to work. "By the way, there was something I was hoping to ask of you."

"Of course, Mother. Anything for you," Eizenfald responded, his golden eyes gleaming ever brighter. Feeling needed was the ultimate gift after such a long time apart.

"I wanted to fly on your back. May we try it?"

His eyes widened in surprise, and a moment later, he sprang to his feet. "Why, I have only ever dreamed of such a thing!"

Bouncing with glee, he flashed silver and returned to his dragon form. Then he crouched, his tail flicking about like an excited dog's.

"Come now, Mother." He extended his left arm—foreleg, perhaps—and Mira used it as a ramp. His back was broad and covered with silver scales, and with

each step, she marveled at what she'd never been able to do before.

"All right, here we go!" Eizenfald stopped fidgeting and rose to his feet, and Mira's vantage point suddenly shifted. Losing her balance, she grabbed out at some of the protruding scales.

"Whoa, not so fast!"

"My apologies, Mother. I just couldn't keep still."

Even as he apologized, his voice bounced with enthusiasm. Feeling the excitement pouring out of the dragon and knowing he was hopeless to control it, Mira hurried to find a comfortable sitting position.

"All right, Eizenfald. Time to fly," Mira said, trying to downplay her own excitement.

"Yes, Mother!"

The dragon spread his wings, crouched, then bounded into the sky with a mighty flap. The trees around the clearing swayed in the sudden gust, creaking ominously as the lord of the sky took flight.

"Excellent, Eizenfald! You're truly amazing!" Mira cried out, unable to contain her joy any longer. They rose higher with each flap of his mighty wings. She patted his back, and emboldened by his mother's praise, he soared ever higher.

"This is amazing for me too!" he shouted.

Finally, the horizon stretched out before them, and Mira gasped at the view. Mountains, forests, villages, cities, ancient castles, and a clear blue sky that stretched on forever—it was a true feast for the eyes. Man-made structures dappled the land, but from this height, one could see how humanity and nature were living in harmony in this new world.

This view makes it all worthwhile...

Fixing the image in her memory, she turned and looked in the direction of the Silver Towers. She was delighted that she'd succeeded in mounting a summon, and now it was time to put her theory into practice.

"Now, Eizenfald...to the tower!"

Mira pointed in the direction of the Sacred City of Silverhorn, and the dragon roared with approval as he flapped to maintain altitude and gradually changed direction. Then he gently began to glow.

“Here we go, Mother!”

A moment later, he broke the sound barrier.

In the blink of an eye, he passed the mountain range that separated Silverhorn from Lunatic Lake, dragging a supersonic shockwave in his wake that blurred the scenery beneath him. Mira was blown right off his back.

“Oh, come on!” Mira screamed as she experienced the sudden sensation of freefall.

Eizenfald was now a dot on the horizon. After savoring the thrill for a moment, she sighed and brushed at her fluttering hair and outfit in irritation.

Right...of course this would happen, going from a hover to the speed of sound. I should have told him to take it easy for the first flight.

Mira had chosen Eizenfald from among all her summons because he truly commanded the skies. Apparently, he played a little loose with laws of physics too. Inertia applied more to her than it did him.

She slowed her descent with the Air Step spell, watching as Eizenfald’s form grew larger above the distant mountains. It seemed he’d finally realized that he lost his passenger and had come to retrieve her.

“Mother! Forgive me!” With tears in his eyes, he swooped down to catch Mira on his back. Then, with some trepidation, he arched his neck around to look at her.

Mira smiled at his sullen expression and laughed. “These things happen. I’m partially to blame; I was too excited and didn’t think about it.”

“I’m so sorry!” Her unanticipated apology seemed to wound him more than the rebuke he’d expected.

“That’s all right. Let’s try it again, but a bit slower.”

“Certainly!” He gently accelerated to a reasonable speed, and they flew toward the tower.

As they crossed the mountains, they passed over Silverwand, where Mira and Garrett had stopped for lunch a few weeks earlier. Despite the seemingly slow crawl of the scenery below, they were traveling much faster than the Pegasus Carriage and Mira flattened herself against Eizenfald's neck.

Chill crosswinds whipped around her. Shivering slightly, she pulled her coat closed, but it had little effect. *It's colder than I expected. I'll have to remember to wear warmer clothes next time I fly.*

Then the towers peeked out from around Eizenfald's neck. Mira hadn't been back since the day she arrived. That meant she hadn't seen Mariana since then either.

How will I keep up the ruse? Maybe I should just tell her the truth?

Solomon's advice flashed through her mind. For thirty years, Mariana had been waiting for Danblf to return. If there was some guaranteed way for Mira to return to her original form, the waiting wouldn't be so bad. But there didn't seem to be a way to purchase a new Vanity Case or receive one from another player. There was almost no chance of her ever becoming Danblf again.

Her earlier excuse that Danblf was stuck in the Mystic City of Beasts wouldn't last forever. More importantly, she wanted to give her attendant peace of mind. No matter what Mariana thought or how she took it, Mira couldn't bring herself to continue to deceive the woman who had done so much for her.

While she may have been a young woman, a mother looking out at the world from her son's back, it was time for her to take responsibility like Danblf would.

Chapter 10

“SO HOW HAVE YOU BEEN spending your days?” Mira asked Eizenfald mid-flight.

The game never explained such things. Danblf’s summons just appeared when summoned and disappeared when dismissed. But now things clearly weren’t that simple. NPCs had their own lives to live, and she was interested in how her dear companions spent theirs.

“Oh, well, I’ve been with my friends in the dragon capital. That’s where I learned the Humanization technique. It consumes less power than our dragon forms. Being human is energy-neutral.”

“Oho, I see! You learned that in the dragon capital, eh?”

There were two new and important pieces of information. First, there was now apparently a dragon capital, which hadn’t existed back in the game world. She’d have to ask more, but for the moment it seemed pretty self-explanatory. Obviously, it was a capital...full of dragons.

But the second tidbit—the Humanization technique—was far more interesting to Mira. The result was apparent, but the

technique itself was completely unfamiliar. Had she known of it, she wouldn’t have been nearly as surprised when Eizenfald changed into his human avatar.

Metamorphosis was a known technique in demonology, but there was still the issue of aptitude and the fact that the caster was a *dragon*. Only humanoid races could use the nine schools of magic—humans, miao, elves, and so on. If someone had a spirit for a parent, such as the half light spirit Cleos, then the aptitude would pass down on the humanoid side. By contrast, the monster races—such as spirits, dragons, and demons—all had their own systems and variations of magic. Perhaps the technique in question could be specific to dragon magic, but dragons turning into people was unheard of.

At least, it was thirty years ago.

“Who taught you the Humanization technique?”

“That would have been... Hmm, it was a while back. There was a human woman who popped up in the dragon capital. I don’t remember her name, but she wasn’t afraid of us at all. She spent quite some time among us, and we started talking with her more and more.”

The dragons complained to the woman that they had hunted all the prey in the region and were running out of food. After listening to the issue, she said that being energy-neutral was the key to survival. Furthermore, she knew a way for them all to survive on less food than they had before. By taking human form, they would require far less intake to maintain their bodies.

They didn’t know what energy-neutral meant, but Eizenfald and his fellow dragons were desperate and agreed to the proposal. While their power was drastically reduced in human form, so too was their hunger. Thus, the food shortage was solved.

“I see...”

The woman from the dragon’s story intrigued Mira. “Energy-neutral” sounded like a term a former player would use. And if she was a human, then this mysterious woman was using standard magic. The dragons still shouldn’t have been able to use human magic, yet they apparently did. Then again, maybe the skill *was* unique to dragons—but then how did a human develop the technique? Did the woman create a skill that even dragons could use, or did she somehow know a spell *only* usable by dragons? Perhaps it was something else entirely. Whatever the answer, the only certainty was that this mage knew a spell completely unknown to Mira.

Well, isn’t this a fine mystery.

Just how far had this world progressed? Mira’s heart leapt at the prospect of even more new unseen spells and techniques.

“After that, I traveled from human city to human city in search of you, Mother.”

Mira groaned in apology. “Sorry.” It seemed she’d caused Eizenfald more heartache than she’d imagined.

“That’s all right. I’ve found you now. But where were you all this time?” he

asked anxiously.

It was a question Mira had no good way of answering. It was during times like this that she really felt the decades that had passed since she fiddled around with the spare Vanity Case.

“Honestly, I don’t really know. Before I knew it, thirty years had passed me by.”

What else could she say?

The dragon tilted his head in response. “Some things are unexplainable,” he rumbled. All that mattered to him was that they had been reunited.

Mira stared at the horizon and listened to the whistling wind as she considered the importance of meeting the rest of her summons again for the first time.

It took two days to travel from Lunatic Lake to the Sacred City of Silverhorn in a fast carriage, but for the Imperial Dragon Eizenfald, it took only two hours at a leisurely speed. Near Silverhorn, the dragon’s expanding shadow marked their slow descent to an open clearing within the forest. The trees bent and swayed against the waves of wind, sending countless birds scrambling to flight as they tweeted and squawked in panic. Eizenfald’s silver scales gleamed in the sunlight as he touched down with ease. Then the dragon gently squatted and reached out with his left foreleg.

“We’ve arrived, Mother.”

“Hrmm, well done. What a good boy you are.” Mira set foot on the ground for the first time in two hours and then moved to pet the dragon’s snout. He closed his eyes and rumbled happily.

Looks like my transportation problems are solved. All I need is a nice fur coat and I’m set.

“Will you call on me again?”

“Of course! I’ll be relying on you regularly, I imagine. If that’s agreeable.”

“Wonderful!” The pale glow of dismissal enveloped him. His silhouette

blurred before he vanished like a shadow in the fog, released back to the dragon capital.

“Should be about a thirty-minute stroll from here,” Mira muttered to herself, recalling a path she’d seen from above. Then she set off for her tower through the thick trees.

A short time later, Mira found herself straying from her original destination as she peeked into the different shops that lined the main street of Silverhorn.

How are they selling these enriched mana potions for so cheap? Hmmm, these stardust fruits are just sitting here in a regular shop. So much has changed... I wish I’d been here to see it.

She looked over everything that was on display. Many items were half the price they used to be—even rare items that used to only be traded between players. Wandering from shop to shop, she realized she would have to reevaluate her whole sense of value.

Two hours slipped past unnoticed as she browsed and made note of the economic changes.

Just past noon, the hungry Mira made her way to a nearby café to enjoy a sandwich and a hot chocolate as she watched people through the window. Relaxing with her drink, she noticed how many different species were passing by. Of course there was the usual crowd of mages the city was famous for, but the streets were now alive with tourists of all sorts. Closing her eyes in satisfaction, she took a mental snapshot of the sight.

When she exited the café, she glanced over at the nine towers that loomed large overhead despite their considerable distance.

Well, I’d better get going.

She set off, determined to ignore the temptation of window shopping as she headed straight for the Linked Silver Towers.

Leaving the commercial sector, she made her way to the tower district, arriving at the public square beneath the towers that afternoon to find it

packed. All races, all genders, and even a few mages equipped with high-rank gear.

Children ran about excitedly, wielding wooden staffs, pretending to be mages. And as one of them waved their staff and shouted chants they didn't understand, a man—presumably their father—exaggeratedly fell to the ground. The child held up their staff in victory, and Mira noticed that they were wearing...a Wise Man's replica robe. She immediately pictured herself just a few days prior, walking around proudly in her own facsimile.

Wait...those are just children's costumes?!

Mira cringed in agony as the truth set in. It should have been so obvious! She turned empty eyes toward the heavens as she prayed that she hadn't looked like a child at play.

Dashing off from the brutal reminder of her shame, Mira came to a halt before the gate leading to the inner tower grounds. Tourists were there as well, looking up with expressions of wonder and admiration. She would have to be the center of attention, but it would only be for a moment. After a quick glance around, she pulled her Master Key from her Item Box and presented it to the gate. It slowly opened for her, and the crowd began whispering at the sight. But, well, that was to be expected.

The only people who could open this gate were those associated with the towers: researchers, attendants, acting Elders, or perhaps even one of the Nine Wise Men themselves. The humble researchers were top-class mages who had respect and influence on par with nobility in their home countries. The acting Elders even more so. The Nine Wise Men were royalty in their own right. Knowing that, one might expect any one of them to be grand company... But truthfully, the vast majority of the tower mages were oddballs and eccentrics.

In order to gain access to this den of madness, a visitor had to jump through so many hoops that even the backing of influential nobles or powerful foreign kings wasn't enough to secure entry. While some of the techniques and spells developed within the Linked Silver Towers were disseminated to benefit the world, this was still an Alcaitian institution and the home of countless state secrets.

Mira was unaware of the current public image of the towers and the instant celebrity status of anyone with a key to gain entry. The sudden change in the crowd's temperament sent a shiver down her spine. All eyes were upon her.

Oh, no... What did I do this time? she wondered, head spinning as she dashed through the gate with cold sweat trickling down her face. The gate closed silently behind her.

Then the tourists remaining outside went crazy over their good fortune to see it open with their own eyes and catch a glimpse of the inside world. Some would go home to brag that they'd made eye contact with a passing researcher during the brief event. The wave of excitement spread to every corner of the plaza, leaving those who witnessed it firsthand overjoyed and those who missed it in great mourning.

Once an important military stronghold, the nine towers formed the center of the city of Silverhorn. With their tops obscured by the passing clouds, the towers were the icons of the city and drew tens of thousands of sightseers each month. The number of foreign tourists to the towers had greatly increased following the signing of the Limited Non-Aggression Pact.

Mira shot sidelong glances at the researchers absorbed in their work as she made a beeline for the Tower of Evocation. When she entered, she received a number of curious glances of her own. Was *she* the young girl with silver hair who claimed to be Danblf's pupil? Normally, the mages only cared about their own projects, but memories of Danblf and the Nine Wise Men stirred up excitement within the plaza. Even if they excelled in a different school of magic than the researchers, the Elders were still the preeminent mages. This also meant that most everyone here respected the summoning arts. The towers were founded on the ideals of mutual encouragement and friendly rivalry among mages. Those ideals still held strong, even thirty years later.

"Was that Master Danblf's pupil? It's high time the Tower of Evocation was headed for sunnier weather," one researcher murmured. He had worked with Cleos to develop a new method to establish summoning contracts, albeit unsuccessfully. Perhaps she would be the one to return the Tower of Evocation to its former glory.

Mira passed through the hushed first floor of the tower and took the central elevator to the top. She took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves as she ascended. Instead of going to her private chambers, she instead stopped in front of the attendant's office. It was time for Mariana to know everything.

The loyal fairy had spent thirty years watching over the tower and everything in it, trusting that someday Danblf would return. Even if Mira claimed to be Danblf's pupil, she doubted that Mariana would cheerfully part with any of her master's hard-won treasure. Besides, she couldn't bring herself to lie to Mariana any more than she already had. Mira wanted to console and reassure her.

Just as she raised her fist to knock, the door to the neighboring office flew open, and Cleos leaned out with his blond hair aflutter.

"Oh, my, if it isn't Miss Mira! Are you here to see Miss Mariana?" he asked with a smile as he came out to greet her.

"Hrmm, yes."

"I see, I see. Well, when you're done, may I speak with you again? It's about what we discussed at the academy. I was hoping to ask you some questions regarding Master Danblf as well."

"That's fine. Perhaps later." She paused and looked at Cleos. Maybe his presence here was a good opportunity. In dealing with the academy and the problems facing modern summoners, the best help she could offer was Danblf, in the flesh.

Just then, the door opened once more.

Sporting a maid outfit and sapphire pigtails, Mariana peered out to see who was talking outside her door. "Um, can I help you with—oh! It's you, Mistress Mira."

The uppermost floor of the Tower of Evocation was only accessible by a limited few. As acting Elder, Cleos could come and go as he pleased...but when Mariana heard him speaking to someone else, her curiosity was piqued. Although satisfied that a stranger hadn't wandered in, she was still a little surprised to find Mira at her doorstep.

“It’s been a while, Mariana. I have something important to discuss with you. Are you free?”

“Yes, I’m available. What is this regarding?”

“It’s a bit complicated. Let’s go to my—er, Master Danblf’s—chambers. And Cleos as well, I think,” Mira said, taking out Danblf’s—or rather, *her* Master Key.

Mariana gazed with yearning at the key before nodding. “All right.” She stepped through the door and joined them.

“You’d like me there too?” Cleos asked. “Very well. Oh, but I just brewed some *amazing* tea. Perhaps my office here would be the better venue?”

“Hrmm, why not.”

Cleos proudly opened the door to his office. Stowing her Master Key back in her Item Box, Mira followed Mariana inside.

A few minutes later, Mira found herself sitting across from Mariana and Cleos, sipping at a delicious cup of tea. Holding the warm cup, she sighed at the lovely taste of the full-bodied brew and the delightful aroma. Cleos happily watched her, and as he took a sip of his own, he relaxed in satisfaction. Likewise, Mariana reached for her own cup and nodded in approval.

“Now then, er, about what I wanted to tell you... I’m not very good at spinning tales, so I’m going to give it to you straight.” Mira steeled herself, placing her teacup on the table before her. “I don’t know how you two will take this. Especially with me looking, well...like this.”

Shaking off the sudden rush of doubts and worst-case scenarios, she took a breath and tried again. Her eyes filled with determination as she stared directly at the opposing pair.

“I’m not Danblf’s pupil. I’m Danblf.”

The other two slowly chewed over the information.

“So...you’re saying that you’re not Mira, but actually Master Danblf, is that right?” Cleos appeared to be dumbfounded by the outlandishness of it all.

“Just so. I created the name Mira as a cover to match this appearance. I know this is difficult to believe.”

Cleos looked over at her as though inspecting a specimen beneath a magnifying glass. His face twisted with bewilderment as he muttered to himself.

Mariana had been stunned into silence, but she finally organized her thoughts and moved to speak. “Do you...do you have any proof?”

A valid question. No amount of assertion could prove such a thing, but if Mira could show them something that only the Danblf could, that would hopefully be the end of it.

“Hmmm, let’s see...” Mira put a finger to her chin and she considered her options. Naturally, the strongest proof was Danblf himself.

She couldn’t use the Master Key. No one but the Nine Wise Men should have one—but she’d already claimed to have received it from Danblf. That probably ruled out all transferable items, for that matter. When thinking of nontransferable items, she considered something from the cash shop, but that would just prove she was a former player. Any former player might have them. She could show off the powers that Danblf had, but as his pupil, she was expected to wield them as well. No matter how powerful a summon she displayed, it would only prove that she was a prodigy.

No, she needed to show something unique to Danblf. Mira searched her items and status screen for anything that might serve as proof.

What if I summon Alfina and have her vouch for me? No, they could say I coerced her into it. Just words won’t be enough.

Closing out the menus, she looked up to find the other two looking at her with unreadable expressions. Even if she were to share stories about the pair they could just be dismissed as having been handed down from her teacher. She anguished over the trouble she was having in proving who she was.

As she wrestled with her thoughts, she glanced at Mariana, who seemed to have a small glimmer of hope in her eyes.

Mariana. Fairies. Mariana is a fairy... The answer came to her like a bolt from the blue. “That’s it! I’ve got it!”

“Er, Mistress Mira...?”

Mira stood and walked over to Mariana, then respectfully held out her right palm.

“A Fairy’s Blessing. A fairy can only bestow a single blessing in their lifetime. If we can restore that blessing right here and now, that will definitively prove that I am Danblf.”

Mariana’s expression changed with a start as she realized just what Mira was saying. A Fairy’s Blessing was a special arrangement, almost like a betrothal, in which a fairy recognized and devoted themselves to someone else for their entire life. The blessing’s effects depended on the fairy who granted it, but it could never be broken, revoked, or transferred. It also had a time limit—three days from the blessing’s bestowal. After that, the blessing could be renewed, but *only* for the person who had received it in the first place.

Mariana had given her blessing to Danblf, so if it could be renewed with Mira, it would serve as absolute proof that the two were one and the same.

“I see,” said Cleos. “Indeed, Miss Mariana *did* give Master Danblf her blessing. And if Mira has the same one, that would certainly—” It would certainly mean she *was* Danblf. Suddenly, his face twitched as he remembered complaining bitterly to Mira about Danblf just a few weeks earlier. Picking up his teacup with a trembling hand, he drained the contents and told himself to remain calm.

“All right.” With a quivering voice, Mariana placed her left hand to Mira’s right and closed her eyes. A few seconds after their hands met, a glow spilled forth.

“Hrmm.”

They’d seen this reaction countless times before, whenever the blessing was renewed. Realizing this meant that he was in danger, Cleos scanned the room to confirm his escape route. The light slowly retreated and converged on the backs of their hands, creating a small floating feather mark.

“It’s been...renewed.” Mariana’s eyes widened and she stared at the back of her hand, cradling it to her chest with the utmost care. Mariana’s eyes brimmed with tears.

Mira traced the mark on her hand with satisfaction. “See, I told you...” She trailed off as she choked up with emotion, thinking back to her reunion with

Mariana upon coming to this world. Back then, her guilt had prevented her from brushing away the fairy's tears.

"I'm sorry," she said, reaching out to gently swipe a tear as it trailed down Mariana's cheek.

Mariana beamed with joy, and then bashfully grasped Mira's hand in her own. "We finally meet again."

Mira caught her happy tears over and over again.

Chapter 11

ONCE MIRA REVEALED the truth to Mariana and Cleos, the impact took a moment to subside. Next came the daunting task of explaining how it happened—how it was the work of a unique item with hidden powers. How she opened a box and was changed into this form. How she required another of the same item to undo the change...and how that she might never find one ever again. She explained that she'd kept this a secret when they first met because she was afraid that they might despise her if they saw what she had become.

Mariana was the first to speak, and her reaction was ever so slightly indignant: "I would never despise you for something like that, Master Danblf. It's awful that you'd suggest such a thing."

"I agree, Master Danblf," Cleos hastily added, gulping down his fifth cup of tea.

"We fairies never judge someone based on their appearance. No matter what form you may take, you'll always be Master Danblf to me. Nothing will change my commitment to you."

"She's right. I don't care one bit either... In fact, it's kind of nice that you're not nearly as terrifying as you once were." His tone was joking, but his eyes were serious. "Still, a box that changes one's appearance? It must be some sort of artifact."

He closed his eyes in thought. No matter how powerful the instrument, he couldn't recall one that would fundamentally change someone's form. If there were such a thing, he could only imagine it was some god-given gift capable of performing miracles.

Precious artifacts did exist, and Mira had even seen a few herself during her time in the game. They might be rewards for particularly long and arduous quests, or loot dropped from the most challenging legendary beasts. However, she couldn't recall one on the level of a Vanity Case. So, on some level, it was god-given...or at least server-given after cash was paid. But there was no way she could explain cash shop items to people who used to be NPCs. She could

never prove it either. And why subject her friends to a needless existential crisis?

“That may be true. But I was also careless,” she said, running with the artifact theory. It wasn’t that far from the truth. It *was* an item that performed miracles, and this explanation made it easier to comprehend. “Most importantly, we need to keep this between us.”

“Of course.” Mariana immediately agreed with a nod.

Cleos was less than certain. “Hmm, but why? If we told the people that Master Danblf had returned to reclaim his position among the Nine Wise Men, it would guarantee the future of summoning, wouldn’t it?”

He had a point. But Mira also saw the wisdom in Solomon’s logic. Her appearance was just too different from Danblf’s. At best, no one would take her seriously. At worst, it could cause an international incident. Aside from her former-player friends, these two had been the closest to Danblf. They’d understand even if no one else would.

Moreover, Mira had access to certain tasks and opportunities because she *wasn’t* Danblf. As a known Wise Man, she would have far less freedom, and she wouldn’t be able to continue searching for the other Elders.

She would eventually retake her rightful position, but now was not the time.

“Hrmm, you two should probably know some other things as well...” Filtering through all her information, Mira decided it was best to share some of the particulars. She trusted the pair, and bringing them into the loop would only strengthen their bond, giving new life to their relationship.

“Only two others know the truth: Solomon and Luminaria. Solomon has asked me to search for the other missing Wise Men, wherever they might be.”

“What?! A search for the Nine Wise Men?!” Cleos cried, incredulous.

The disappearance of the Nine Wise Men was a national calamity, to be sure, but he had yet to hear of a sanctioned search for their whereabouts. It made sense, though. They were the kingdom’s strongest military force, and there had been speculation as to why a formal search had never been conducted. One theory held that they had departed this world, and as the years passed, that

theory became the most plausible.

But now it turned out that King Solomon, supreme ruler of the kingdom, and Danblf, one of the Nine Wise Men, were searching for the others. That would only happen if those two worthies actually thought the rest of the Wise Men were scattered throughout the world.

Cleos could hardly contain his excitement.

“Anyhow, if I reclaim my title, I won’t be able to search for them properly,” Mira continued, bringing him back to the present. “So I need to entrust the tower to you for a while longer. Is that all right?”

“Absolutely! I’ll do whatever it takes if it means the Nine Wise Men are returned to us!” Cleos trembled as he remembered the last time the full group had been assembled. As a mage himself, he couldn’t help but rejoice at the thought of the Linked Silver Towers returning to their glory days.

“That means you’ll be leaving again,” Mariana muttered. In contrast to the elated Cleos, she’d been silent all this time.

Mariana had been moved to tears by Mira’s return, and now her master was planning on leaving and heading into danger somewhere far away. But what other choice did Mira have? It was a mission of national importance and not easily abandoned.

“I apologize. That was selfish of me.” Mariana tried to smile, but her gaze was forlorn.

“I also understand how you feel, Miss Mariana, but this will have a great impact on the future of our country. Besides, things are different now—Master Danblf is returned to us. We can rejoice in that knowledge, at least.” Cleos sounded more like he was trying to reassure himself. He flashed Mira a smile.

His use of “we” and “us” meant the acting Elders and attendants of the towers. The Nine Wise Men were an odd group full of weirdos, yet they somehow had the steadfast devotion of their aides and deputies.

“I promise to come back whenever I can,” said Mira, and the pair nodded with relief.

Picking up her cup, she sipped at her cooled tea and smiled ruefully as she imagined all the hassle of traveling back and forth. Nevertheless, her heart warmed as the weight of her deception was lifted away.

“Still, um...” Cleos began, giving Mira a nervous look.

“What is it?”

His smile twitched. “Calling you Master Danblf when you look like that feels rather odd. Perhaps to keep up the cover story, we should continue calling you Mistress Mira?”

“Argh...” Mira’s brow furrowed in distress. He made a good point; if they wanted to keep the secret, they had to settle this now, otherwise someone might slip up. “Hrmm, you’re right. Very well. So long as I look like this, keep calling me Mira.”

At that, Cleos looked oddly relieved. “Understood, Mistress Mira.”

“Are you all right with that, Mariana?”

“Yes, I’m fine with it,” she told Mira, still stroking her own feather mark. This was the proof of the Fairy’s Blessing linking the two, the mark showing just how much she treasured the person before her. Among the fairies, this bond was revered above all else. Compared to that, a change in name or looks was insignificant.

“Well, then I suppose that’s that. I’ll be taking off again for a little while, so I’m counting on you two to take care of things.”

“I won’t let you down!” Mariana said with a serious nod.

Cleos wore a reassuring smile. “I shall endeavor to serve with the best of my abilities.”

The next moment the clattering of a bell echoed throughout the office.

“Hrmm, what’s that noise?”

“That’s the emergency technomancy communicator!” Jumping to his feet, Cleos rushed to his desk, where he opened a black box and twisted a lever on the device inside. “Acting Elder Cleos speaking.”

“Sir, this is Giosue of the Silverhorn Patrol,” came a faint male voice from the handset. Mira could only barely hear the other side of the conversation from a few paces away. “We have an emergency and are contacting the towers for instruction.”

“All right, what’s the issue?”

“Three hours ago, we received reports from nearby settlements that a large dragon was seen in the skies overhead. We sent out a patrol to confirm, and while we didn’t see the beast ourselves, we did find traces of something enormous landing in a forest clearing northwest of the city. We focused our search around that area but have yet to find a cause. We thought it might have been a misidentification, but we just received word from Silverwand that they observed a large dragon flying back and forth over the area before moving in our direction a few hours ago. No witnesses have seen the dragon flying away, so it’s highly likely that it’s concealed itself and is hiding somewhere nearby. Unfortunately, we’re out of options, so we’re contacting the towers for assistance.”

“A dragon, you say... If it came from the direction of Silverwand, it may have also passed close to Lunatic Lake.” The two were just a mountain range away, after all.

“Yes, sir. Highly possible.”

He glanced over at Mira, and she averted her gaze. Fidgeting, she moved to take a sip of tea, only to notice the teacup was already empty and then gently put it back on the table. Very suspicious.

The patrolman waited patiently for Cleos’s response.

“Return with a minimal detail and await further instructions. Who else have you contacted?”

“Understood, sir. We’ve also contacted Mistress Luminaria.”

“All right. I’ll contact her as well. Now, begin your return.”

“Will do, sir! Thank you.”

The call audibly ended, and then the office was quiet once more.

“Mistress Mira...*you* were in Lunatic Lake yesterday, were you not? How did you get here?” Closing up the black box, Cleos looked at Mira, both exasperated and inquisitive. It was clear from his face that he already knew what happened.

“Hrmm... Uh, you see...I...”

Mariana giggled as Mira’s reaction clued her in to the truth of the matter. “Mistress Mira, you *didn’t*. Did you?”

Cornered, Mira hung her head in resignation. “I may have...flown here on Eizenfald.”

“I knew it! It *had* to be Eizenfald! No wonder people are panicking.”

While traveling with Danblf, Cleos had become well acquainted with the dragon—his bravery, his massive size, his undeniable presence. With such a threat spotted so close to human settlements, the uproar made total sense.

Mira thought she’d been careful, hence why she first summoned him in the woods outside of Lunatic Lake. Evidently, that wasn’t enough. People couldn’t stand the dark of night, much less the sight of a beast that could reap their lives like a scythe slicing wheat.

“I have to explain this to Mistress Luminaria. Please, Mistress Mira, try to show a little restraint in the future.”

“Hrmm... Sorry about this.”

As Cleos made his way from the office, he was glad to see Mira feeling at least a little remorse. *Perfect timing on that call, he thought. Gives me a chance to escape before she brings up my little indiscretion from before. Even so, riding in on Eizenfald? Still overdoing everything, I see. Life is about to get interesting again.*

He was practically skipping as he made his way to the Tower of Sorcery.

“Oh, Mistress Mira, you haven’t changed a bit,” Mariana said, smiling. She was reminded how moderation had never been a word in Danblf’s vocabulary.

Mira picked up her empty teacup yet again and scowled. “I suppose I wasn’t careful enough.”

Sorry, Eizenfald. Looks like I won’t be calling on you as often as I promised.

When she'd dismissed the dragon earlier, she thought she'd found the perfect means of transportation—but it seemed that was too good to be true. She resolved to summon him someplace out of the way to explain things properly. Her poor, big, adorable dragon child.

Mariana picked up her own cup before plucking the one from Mira's hand, saying, "I'll make another pot of tea." She headed to a corner of the room where Cleos kept a special technomancy device made solely for the purpose of brewing tea.

Mira giggled as she watched Mariana shuffle around. *It's like we're like newlyweds!* But in this situation, who was the husband and who was the wife? Perhaps they were more like a kindly older sister and her rambunctious younger sister.

A few moments later, Mariana placed fresh cups on the table. "Here you are, Mistress Mira."

"Hrmm, thank you," said Mira, taking a sip. "Phew..."

The aroma of the tea helped her regain her composure, and she looked over at Mariana, who had once again taken a seat across from her. Solomon's tale of the fairy waiting for her master to return came to the forefront of Mira's mind.

"You took care of cleaning my room and managing my belongings while I was away. I'm sorry I left you with all that."

Mariana's smile grew wider. "Oh, it was no bother at all. It gave me purpose."

The two began to reminisce, getting lost in their memories together. Mira was spellbound by Mariana's retelling of her life over the past thirty years.

After some time, Cleos returned.

"Good news! Mistress Luminaria and I smoothed over the whole dragon mess. No need to worry." He grinned at the two young ladies engaged in their chat. "Well, doesn't this look fun? May I join in?" he asked, then swapped out his old teacup for a fresh one from the shelf.

"I'd like to be included as well," came a familiar voice from behind them. Mira turned to see a beauty with long crimson hair staring at her with an impish look.

“And what business might you have with us, Luminaria?” Mira joked.

Luminaria smiled broadly and hugged Mira from behind. “Come now, Grandpa. You haven’t forgotten your own granddaughter’s face, now have you?” Then she leaned in close and whispered with a smirk, “So you’ve told them? Getting more settled in, are we?”

A moment later, she pulled back to accept the tea that Cleos was offering. Taking a sip, she looked at the other three happy people and her eyes narrowed in delight.

“To commemorate this joyous reunion, I shall treat you all to dinner.”

No one argued against this marvelous idea, and she instructed them to meet in front of the Tower of Sorcery at half past six. Then she bounded off to begin the preparations.

Mira chuckled. “As demanding as ever, that one...”

The three of them continued to reminisce until the flow of the conversation had led back to some of the idle grumbles that Cleos had made during their initial reunion.

“I thought I was doing the right thing. I apologize, Cleos,” Mira said sincerely.

“Oh, no... Think nothing of it...” But Cleos couldn’t stop the cold sweat from breaking out across his brow.

Mira, Cleos, and Mariana stood before the Tower of Sorcery at the scheduled time. With both the acting Elder and the tower attendant standing together, they drew a lot of attention. Some researchers called out greetings as they passed. One even came over and delivered an experimental device in the hopes that it would revitalize the school of summoning. Mira wanted to know all about it, but Cleos said that while it worked, it didn’t guarantee a summoning contract. This just reinforced what Mira already knew: Help was useful, but there was no substitute for hard work.

Soon, Luminaria threw open the tower doors. “Thank you for waiting. Please, come in!”

“Aren’t we going somewhere?” Mira asked, but Luminaria smiled softly and poked her forehead.

“We can’t talk freely in any ordinary restaurant. You’ve had some real adventures, and I want to hear *all* about them.”

“Hrmm, so that explains the invitation to dinner,” Mira mumbled to herself as she stepped into the tower. Luminaria was undoubtedly talking about the demon.

The sorceress led the three to her private chambers. The furnishings were finely crafted but rather plain, a far cry from their owner. Mira was unsurprised; Luminaria had never shown much interest in furniture or decor. She left those matters to her attendant, Lythalia, who had kept the room minimalist, but comfortable and functional. Mira was also unsurprised to learn that Lythalia had prepared the entirety of the evening’s meal.

She finished laying the dishes out on the table and then approached Mira.

“Good evening, Mistress Mira. You mentioned you would tell me more about Master Danblf. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Ah, w-well, perhaps... Hrmm,” Mira stammered with an indescribable expression, recalling that she *had* made a promise to that effect the last time she left the tower.

Surrounded by friends and enjoying a meal, Mira took the lead and shared stories from her adventures. She told them of Soul Howl’s mysterious quest, her battle against a demon, the mysterious spirit kidnappings, and so on—all things that couldn’t be talked about in a public restaurant where the walls might have ears.

Amid the joyful conversation, Lythalia kept her gaze pinned on Mira, eyes shining, as though trying to tug at her heartstrings. Since everyone else in the room knew, Mira came clean to Lythalia as well. Mariana and Cleos both vouched for the veracity of her claim.

Lythalia froze with a blank smile on her face.

As the elven attendant sat there in shock, Mira told Luminaria about what happened at the academy. She grumbled a bit before moving on to discussing the effort to restore evocation's reputation. Mira managed to extract a promise from Luminaria to assist Cleos while she was away, which left Cleos looking tense for some unknowable reason.

In return, Luminaria asked Mira to collect further catalysts on her behalf. A Snowmelt Crystal, the scale of a Frost Dragon, and a Frozen Lance. Mira agreed, and the four continued discussing state secrets.

They left Lythalia as she was.

Chapter 12

AFTER DINNER—which gradually turned into a strategy meeting—Mira, Mariana, and Cleos returned to the Tower of Evocation. It was nearly ten in the evening, and Mira let out a small sleepy sigh as her eyelids fluttered.

All I want to do now is take a bath and head to bed, she thought, preparing to pull out her Master Key to get back inside. But Mariana opened the door for her.

“Ah, thank you, Mariana.”

“My pleasure.” Her expression was one of elation. She was glad to perform a task after so long, no matter how small or simple.

“I’m going to prepare for tomorrow and then go to bed,” Cleos said.
“Goodnight, Mistress Mira, Miss Mariana.”

“Oho, need my assistance?”

“No, no, nothing you need to trouble yourself with. I will be giving a safety lecture to prospective summoners and just need to check over my material.”

“Hrmm, okay. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but I’m leaving the tower in your capable hands.”

“I’ll do my best!” Cleos replied confidently, then headed off to his office. Mira watched him go and entered her own quarters, heading straight for the changing room. When she opened the door, she turned to find Mariana standing close behind with an expectant look on her face.

“I’ll be all right, Mariana. You can head off to bed as well.”

“No, if you’re going to be taking a bath, it’s my duty to wash your back.”

“You don’t need to do that for me.”

“I will wash your back.”

“But—”

“I *will* wash your back.”

“Hrmm, fine. If you’re going to force the issue...” Mira conceded, defeated by Mariana’s persistence and utter refusal to back down. *Well, so long as it’s just a back scrub. No point making a big stink about it.*

Despite Mariana’s position as her attendant, it still felt awkward to accept, but if she insisted, there were no grounds to refuse. Mariana was focused completely on Mira as though venting years of pent-up desire to help and serve. When Mira grabbed her coat to take it off, Mariana was there to gently assist before placing it neatly on the storage shelf.

With Mariana’s assistance, Mira found removing her dress much easier than putting it on. She slid off her panties before heading into the bath. Left alone in the changing room, Mariana cheerfully arranged the discarded clothes and then reached for the hem of her own dress.

Mira was utterly conflicted.

Mariana was currently *very* nude and waiting on her hand and foot. Was it more suspicious to avert her gaze to avoid catching a glimpse, or would she give offense if she looked at Mariana like this was a perfectly normal situation? The more aware she was of what was going on behind her, the more Mira’s rationality suffered. Her relaxing bath time was now tense and dominated by Mariana.

“I’ll wash your front as well.”

“Hrmm? Sure...” She just kept agreeing with whatever her attendant said, and now she was getting a full-body scrub-down.

Flashes of pale skin in her periphery were accompanied by infrequent, soft touches against her back, arms, and shoulders. While fighting against the naughty urges that welled up within, Mira tensed at the sensation of being stroked all over during the full-body wash.

For over twenty minutes, Mira somehow managed to endure. The experience pushed the limits of her self-control. The whole affair forced her to recognize that she had never truly appreciated how cute Mariana was. When it was all finally over, Mira couldn’t bring herself to offer to scrub Mariana’s back in return. She simply told her attendant to enjoy a long soak before she fled the bathroom.

In the changing room, she found a simple robe had been laid out for her, intended as loungewear. *Of course...*

Appreciating all Mariana did on her behalf, Mira slipped on the robe before relaxing on the sofa with a post-bath apple au lait. While she fiddled with the robe's hem and thought about summoning, Mariana reappeared from the bath, her skin slightly flushed.

"I'll make sure these are washed."

"Hrmm, very well."

Mariana was dressed in a robe identical to the one Mira was wearing and was holding her maid's outfit along with the neatly folded technomancy robes and panties. That reminded Mira of her Elder's robes—the original article, not the replica.

"Speaking of, I think I left one of my robes here last I visited."

"Ah, I cleaned those and put them in my room. I'll fetch them for you," Mariana said with a bow before taking her leave.

I suppose I'll get ready for bed.

Mira leaned back against the sofa and lightly stretched, then tottered over to her bed and flopped down on it. She dozed off until Mariana returned with the robe.

"Here it is."

"Hrmm, thank you."

Accepting the robe, Mira looked at the other item Mariana was holding. It was a small cloth bundle that was cutely decorated, soft-looking, and cylindrical.

"What's that you've got there?"

"A pillow."

Did Mariana think she needed an extra pillow? No, that couldn't be it. There could only be one reason.

"You're sleeping *here* tonight?"

“Yes.”

“So we’d be sleeping together? As a man and a woman—”

“But *you* are a woman now, Mistress Mira. So that’s not an issue, right?”

“Urk.” It didn’t seem like such a problem when she said it that way. But as Mira well knew, spending the night beside a pretty woman like Mariana would be an endless struggle between reason and libido—and the fairy wasn’t a thing to be taken in a fit of desire.

Mariana’s perception of the situation was undoubtedly different. She’d devoted her body and soul to Mira when she bestowed her Fairy Blessing. Mira was both a master to be served and a partner.

“Would it be so horrible to share a bed with me?” Mariana asked, her voice lonesome.

Mira remained silent for a few moments while her mind struggled to catch up. “Not horrible, no. Just...” She denied it, but deep down, she was feeling more embarrassment than desire. If she’d been given more notice that this might happen, she would have been a little more prepared. Refusal was not an option.

“All right,” she sighed, scooching toward the left side of the bed along with her pillow.

Mariana placed her pillow in the now-vacant space and slipped gracefully under the covers.

“I really am glad to see you again,” she murmured, her voice trembling as the two lay side by side.

I abandoned her for thirty years...

Mira turned to look and found Mariana’s eyes wet with tears. Suddenly, Mira was fine with the situation. Thirty years was easy to say, but an awful long time to live through.

“I’m sorry.” Staring up at the canopy, embroidered with images of angels dancing in paradise, she apologized for the umpteenth time. Then she felt Mariana’s hand come to rest on her tummy.

“Wh-what is it?” Mira’s body twitched at the tickling sensation, and she

turned back to Mariana only to find herself almost nose-to-nose with the fairy.

Then Mariana's hand reached further.

What...? What's going on here?!

"Mistress Mira...once more," Mariana whispered in Mira's ear, sliding her hand over to Mira's and grasping it tightly. She closed her tear-filled eyes, and a faint light shone from under the covers.

"Ah, so that's what you were after," Mira mumbled, simultaneously relieved and disappointed.

She squeezed Mariana's hand in return and raised them up to their faces. Their eyes met as they both looked at the renewed feather marks on the backs of their hands.

"What did you think I was doing?"

"Uh... N-nothing." Mira looked away in panic, and Mariana giggled and squeezed her hand a bit tighter.



A Fairy's Blessing was proof of a strong bond linking two people together. As Mariana smiled happily, Mira blamed herself for letting degenerate thoughts run wild in her head. Mariana was an innocent soul, and her longing for her master's approval was pure. Reaffirming this fact for herself, Mira felt a sense of clarity as though her sinful thoughts were blown away.

"Mistress Mira."

"What is it?"

"It's nothing," Mariana said, giggling childishly.

"What's this about?"

"I just like saying it."

In the pale glow of their entwined hands, the pair discussed their likes and dislikes, their recent interests, and other trifling matters until they both finally slipped off to sleep.

Despite not being a morning person, Mira awoke the following morning with a clear head. She felt wonderful until her cheeks reddened with embarrassment as she recalled the events of last night.

Speaking of which...

"Hrmm, she's already up?" Looking to her left, she saw Mariana's abandoned pillow still on the bed. The menu on her Control Terminal informed her that it was just past eight in the morning.

Stretching out the kinks, she squinted through her sunlit window out at the morning scenery and reveled at the signs of life in the city below. Soon, she noticed the gentle sounds of breakfast preparation coming from her living room. Mira emerged from the bedroom to see what Mariana had in store.

"Good morning, Mistress Mira," Mariana said, wearing her usual maid outfit. A faint savory aroma drifted from the table, where two place settings were arranged. Mira stopped and stared at the little piece of heaven.

"Um, is everything all right?" Mariana added, unsure what to make of Mira's

intense look. Her voice pulled Mira back to reality.

“Uh...no, I’m fine. Good morning.” Mira averted her gaze and disappeared into the restroom. It wasn’t like she could admit to fantasizing about being newlyweds. Pulling up her robe and going about her business, she issued herself a stern mental warning about getting carried away.

With freshly washed hands, she returned to the living room to find Mariana waiting and holding her freshly laundered clothes.

“Here you are, Mistress Mira. Your clothes for today.”

“Now then—” Mira began, but was interrupted as Mariana handed her a pair of underwear. When she unfolded it, she was blown away. It was incredibly cute and girly, decorated with lace and ribbons.

“H-hrmm.” She hesitated, but a stern look from Mariana prompted her to pull them on. Then she removed her robe, leaving her mostly naked.

Mariana smiled. “By the way, I didn’t notice a brassiere in your laundry. Do you not wear one?”

Last night, and now this morning, Mira was only wearing panties; Mariana was sure that this might lead to serious issues down the road.

“I don’t really know how to put one on,” Mira admitted, sticking with her policy of being honest with Mariana. “I have some, though.”

“Are they with you?”

“Hrmm, I suppose.” Mira retrieved a bag with various sets of clothes out from her Item Box. Inside the bag were several sets of underwear, split into two compartments: clean and dirty.

Right, I forgot to put out my laundry.

“Do these need to be cleaned?” Mariana took notice of the sets of panties that had been carelessly wadded back in the bag. All of them had fairly simple decorations.

“Yes, could you take care of it?”

“Of course,” Mariana replied immediately. After folding them, she went to

fetch a laundry basket from the changing room. “Anything else?”

Thus prompted, Mira pulled out her first magical-girl-styled robe and the Wise Man’s replica robe that she’d itemized and stuck in her Item Box rather than the bag. The first she probably wouldn’t wear anymore. It had been a thoughtful gift from the palace maid corps—and she was pretty sure she’d be cursed if she mistreated it—but it really wasn’t her style. The replica might make a good gift for a child somewhere down the line, but she didn’t think it would be wise to keep wearing it either.

“These as well, please.”

“As you wish.” Mariana added the two articles of clothing to the basket, then reached into the bag and pulled out some of the bras. “These *should* fit you.”

“The palace maids gave me those. They showed me how to put them on, but I forgot.”

Mariana picked one out and stood up. “Then I shall teach you again.”

Knowing refusal was futile, Mira demurely accepted the lesson. At least this time it wasn’t Amarette accosting her on a busy street and threatening an act of spontaneous exhibitionism. So, as Mariana instructed, Mira shyly but carefully listened to the explanation.

After Mariana put it on her once as an example, Mira removed the bra and reattached it a few times in succession to make sure she remembered the process. After a dozen or so repetitions, she seemed to have gotten the gist of it. Mariana smiled when Mira thanked her, pleased that she’d been able to teach her something.

With all that out of the way, Mira donned her technomancy robes, and the two sat down at the table to enjoy a leisurely breakfast.

As Mira sipped a post-breakfast hot cocoa, a bell chimed somewhere in the chamber.

“Hrmm, isn’t that the thing from yesterday?” she asked at nearly the same moment Mariana stood.

“It’s the technomancy communicator. I’ll get it.” Mariana opened a cupboard near her private quarters. Inside was a device like the one Cleos had used the day before. She twisted the lever on the device to connect the two parties, and for just a moment a high-pitched squeal echoed throughout the room.

“Mariana, attendant of the Tower of Evocation speaking.”

“This is Suleiman, attendant to the king in Palace Alcait. Is Lady Mira there?”

“One moment, please,” said Mariana before calling Mira to the device.

After a short conversation with Suleiman, Mira found herself called to the palace to discuss the documents he’d been tasked to decipher. A problem required her immediate attention.

“Looks like you’re leaving already,” Mariana said, looking deflated.

“I’ll be back as soon as this is settled. Thank you, Mariana. So long as you’re thinking of me, this is where I’m meant to be.”

Mira was slightly embarrassed to say such a thing, but her words were heartfelt. She couldn’t deny the realization that had developed over the past evening. Mariana nodded slightly, then moved toward Mira, taking her right hand. As they renewed the Fairy’s Blessing, the two exchanged quiet smiles. But they couldn’t linger long; there was much to do before Mira returned.

Mira’s fastest way back to the palace was by dragon, but she didn’t have the clothes to ward off the inevitable chill. She and Mariana raided the storeroom, and a few minutes later, they found the perfect fur coat. It was surprisingly soft and pure white like freshly fallen snow. Being one of Danblf’s garments, it was a bit large for her current size, but that wasn’t much of a problem as she intended to wear it as an overcoat to block the wind.

Next stop was the refining room, where she gathered up a supply of element-attuned Magic Stones that Solomon had requested along with Blasting Stones that could be used to forge summoning contracts. Then she considered what else she might need.

I wonder what the urgency is? I hope it’s nothing major.

She fretted about the problem at the palace. Unforeseen issues were always a

pain, and hopefully it would only be a minor inconvenience. Regardless, it never hurt to stock up on the essentials.

“Right, shall we be off?” Cleos’s voice buzzed through the communicator in intercom mode. If not being used as a long-distance telephone, the device could be set so people could talk to one another no matter where they were on the top floor.

When he’d heard that Mira was returning to the palace, he had decided to come with. A few moments after checking in, he stepped into Mira’s chambers.

“I wish I could have shown you how to tie up your hair as well,” Mariana muttered regretfully, a ribbon in her hand. Her opportunity to style Mira’s silver hair was growing short, and Cleos’s sudden arrival meant she had even less time than she thought.

“Hrmm... Maybe we’ll have the chance next time,” Mira said as Mariana stared daggers at Cleos. “Well, I guess I must be off.”

“Take care, and come back soon,” her assistant murmured, forlorn.

As Cleos and Mira stepped into the elevator, he wondered what had transpired after he took his leave the night before.

In front of the Tower of Evocation sat a small wood and metal carriage with no horses hitched to it. It was just barely large enough for one person.

“Now, Mistress Mira. You know we can’t take Eizenfald,” Cleos said, driving the point home with a pointed glance as he stood beside the carriage and affixed a summoning location.

“I’m aware...” She sulked, but before she could think of another summon that would allow her to fly, Cleos cast his spell.

[Evocation: Garuda]

A great gust of wind blew away the summoning circle. As it subsided, a giant bird emerged, scattering light in all the colors of the rainbow. The spirit settled on a perch atop the carriage.

“Oho... Garuda, eh? So you’ll be flying on him.”

“No, I’ll be riding inside. Garuda will carry the wagon as he flies.”

It looked like a tiny carriage to her, but Cleos insisted on calling it a wagon, so a wagon it was. Mira looked up at the bird which was about the size of a small house as Cleos threw open the door to the carriage with a flourish.

Would this be a bird-drawn wagon? Mira wondered. Not so much drawn as carried, really. Peeking inside, she found the interior most comfortable.

“Oho! I see! This protects from the cold nicely, and it keeps your butt from getting sore to boot!” Jumping inside, she sank into the plush seat, repeatedly saying, “Nice. Very nice.”

“It’s intended for one passenger, but you’re small enough that I think we can squeeze in together. Would you like a ride?” Cleos asked with an almost paternal smile.

“Can I?!” Scooching over into the corner, she made just enough room for him to sit as he closed the door behind him.

“It should be fine,” he replied, prompting her face to light up with childish innocence. “Yes, I think this will do. Off to Lunatic Lake!” When he knocked on the ceiling of the wagon, the bird began flapping its wings, creating a wild gust all around them.

“Will we take off or not?!” Mira looked excitedly out the window at the surrounding plants and flowers being buffeted by the wind.

With a sudden shudder, they rose into the air, and the world dropped away beneath them. She gaped at the world below as each flap of Garuda’s massive wings gently lifted them higher. Cleos watched on, a protective instinct sprouting up alongside his loyalty.

“Oho! Look how small the tower is already. This is great! Truly fantastic!” Mira managed to peel her eyes away from the window. “How do I get one of these?”

she asked expectantly.

“The wagon? Well, first, if you’d be so kind as to sit back down...” Cleos went on to explain that he’d had it made by the palace craftsmen and that another could probably be made if necessary.

Determined to see to it as soon as they arrived, Mira pulled out two bottles of apple au lait and offered one to Cleos. Together, the pair enjoyed a nice relaxing flight.

Chapter 13

GARUDA SET THE WAGON down in the palace's front plaza. The guards seemed unsurprised by the sight, and they immediately stood to attention and saluted. After Cleos emerged, they were momentarily taken aback at the sight of the young girl with shimmering silver hair hopping down behind him. When they realized it was Mira, they quickly regained their composure before anyone noticed.

"Thank you. That was quite comfortable," Mira said before looking up at Garuda. "Well done, up there!" Garuda trilled in return as if it understood her message.

Cleos nodded and smiled. "I'm glad to have been of assistance. Take care now, Mistress Mira."

"Hrm. You do the same. And take care of those new summoners."

During their flight, she had given him some Blasting Stones. The unexpected gift motivated him to face the rest of the day.

Mira watched as Cleos climbed back into the vehicle and took off in the direction of the academy. She turned and entered the palace, whereupon a maid escorted her to the archives and handed her over to Lily.

"Miss Mira, we've been expecting you," Lily said, leading her further inside. "This way, please."

White walls held up a high ceiling above a wide atrium. Around the sides of the atrium were three floors lined with gray metal shelves containing information from around the world, all carefully categorized and filed. Lily brought Mira to a room at the far end of the first level, where Solomon and Luminaria were waiting for her.

"Thank you, we'll take care of the rest," Solomon said.

"Of course, Your Majesty." She bowed and turned to leave, but first she whispered in Mira's ear. "When possible, I'd love to hear your impressions of the outfit."

After her departure, Mira sank into one of the nearby chairs. “So you found problems. What are we looking at?”

Looking troubled, Solomon handed over a piece of paper. “This is all we were able to decode. It seems that even Suleiman’s knowledge wasn’t enough for some of the key parts.”

“Oho, even with all this reference material?” she said in surprise, scanning the document.

Suleiman’s abilities were above and beyond any ordinary scholar. Given the resources of the royal archives at his disposal, no secret should have been beyond his grasp. But the documents hadn’t been created by just any old scholar—they’d been written by Soul Howl, a former player. Suleiman was faced with countless codes and encryptions he’d never encountered before.

The paper in Mira’s hands contained all the information that had been revealed thus far. He’d discovered the base materials that would have to be acquired to create the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light. They could be found in the southern regions of the continent, but there had been issues with deciphering the exact locations.

“We think this is a riddle of some sort,” Luminaria said from her position sitting on the desk, sliding another paper over to Mira. Written on it was:

Between northern Willow and southern Peaks, where Spider Lily covers the west, and Birch sprouts in the east. There, let the sword that bled and leveled the Land become a vessel.

Mira contemplated the contents, then promptly looked up at the ceiling. “It’s gibberish to me.” If the code was unbreakable by even the kingdom’s top mind, what chance did she have?

“Well, I wasn’t expecting *you* to figure it out,” Solomon retorted. “It’s definitely a conundrum, but we do have a lead. I called you here because I’d prefer for you to handle it personally.”

“Ugh... So what’s the lead?” She dropped her face to the table. It was hard to argue with Solomon when he was being so straightforward.

“We know it’s referring to somewhere down south.” Playing up the reveal, he looked out the window as he spoke. “And when it comes to that region, our kingdom just happens to have a valuable resource.”

“You’re talking about the Fools’ Wunderkammer.”

“Bingo.”

Beneath the Kingdom of Alcail lay a dungeon called the Fools’ Wunderkammer. Long ago, researchers known as the Fools of the Crescent Moon loved the land and dedicated their lives to its study. The Wunderkammer was a labyrinthine storehouse that contained all of the research they’d done and materials they’d collected over their lifetimes.

Mira was very familiar with the place, as it was closely connected to the founding of the Kingdom of Alcail. When the world was younger, and there was a rush to establish new nations across the continent, Alcail had faced a unique threat: a great beast dwelling within Lunatic Lake.

The creature surfaced from the lake under the light of the full moon and wrought havoc on the surrounding area. In order to establish their kingdom, the beast had to be dealt with. Any method would’ve been fine, but the monster was frightfully strong, and in those days, there were no players who could easily stand against such a foe.

But then Solomon had the idea to negotiate with the creature. He ventured into the Fools’ Wunderkammer and used the information he learned as a bargaining chip to pacify the monster. In a historical sense, Alcail existed thanks to the Wunderkammer.

Danblf had aided Solomon in his search and was well aware of the value of the stored research. There was no better place to hunt for information in the southern region of the continent. But the Fools’ Wunderkammer was extremely challenging to traverse, and *this* mission required Mira’s personal attention.

“Hrmm, and I’m to conduct the search?”

“Exactly. Can I count on you?” Solomon asked casually, turning from the

window to look back at Mira. He seemed to already know what her answer would be.

“Oh, boy. Well, if there aren’t any other options...” She yielded, leaning back in her chair and stretching. “Wait, it’s a dungeon, right? I suppose that means I need to get a permit from the Union?”

“Ah, that won’t be necessary,” Luminaria said, pulling out a silver key.

“That’s quite fancy. What’s it for?” Mira leaned forward and inspected the key’s elaborate detail.

“The Wunderkammer is under the special jurisdiction of the kingdom due to its historical significance. And because the entrance is under the academy.” Luminaria handed the key to Mira before gracefully recrossing her legs.

“Hrmm, all right, then. And this is what I need to get in?” The key was a fair bit heavier than it looked. She stashed it in her Item Box. “I’ll keep it safe.”

“See that you do. Solomon and I both have keys, as do each of the acting Elders. You’ll need two to gain entry.”

“Will I, now? Well, then give me the other one.” Mira testily held out her hand to Solomon.

“Just a moment... Huh?!” He switched from scrolling through his Item Box to searching his pockets in a panic. After a moment of fumbling around, he walked over to Mira and put his hand over hers. “Shake.”

“I don’t know what sort of comedy routine this is, but it’s not funny.” She batted his hand away with a scowl.

“Well, it seems I’ve misplaced mine.” He laughed, looking rather unbothered.

“You’re a mess. Luckily for you, Cleos is at the academy. I’ll get the other one from him.”

Last night, Cleos had mentioned he was giving a safety lecture to future summoners, so he should still be at the academy when she arrived.

“Oh, right. That’ll work.” Solomon patted Mira on the shoulder with a big phony smile. Then he opened a box on the table and pulled out a book. “All right, now about the Wunderkammer.”

“What’s the book?” Mira asked.

“This is an inventory of the Fools’ Wunderkammer,” he replied, removing a sheet of paper that was tucked between the pages and handing it to her.

Taking the paper, she glanced over it. There were three titles listed: *On Ancient Species and Divergence in Evolutionary Processes*, *Map of Presumed Flora Distribution with Regards to Sediment and Climate Categorization*, and *Adelheid Report #47*.

She grimaced. “These look like snoozefests.” With a sigh, she dropped the paper to the table.

“Suleiman looked over the inventory list and said those three were the best chance of deciphering anything. According to the inventory, you should find all of them on the third level.”

“Wait, the third level?” Intrigued, Mira leaned forward to have a look at the book. There among the countless entries was indeed a mark indicating the third level of the Fools’ Wunderkammer.

Mira’s brow furrowed and she stroked her chin as she considered this development. From what she remembered, the Wunderkammer only had two levels.

The dungeon resembled a massive museum, with the materials and collections becoming more technical and specialized as one progressed from the first to the second level. Given that it was related to the founding of the nation and that it was so close, Mira was very familiar with the dungeon’s layout. She’d never heard of a *third* level.

“Once a game, now reality. You’re still new here, but there are all sorts of new places to explore. The third level is one of them.” Solomon smiled joylessly. “Sometimes we find extra levels in old dungeons. There may be entire areas, once sealed off by the game system, now open to this world.”

“Really now? No wonder I wasn’t aware of it.” Mira’s curiosity grew. This just meant there were more opportunities for adventuring. She was an explorer at heart. “Now, I don’t mind going, but I seem to recall anti-theft measures that keep one from leaving the dungeon with any of the materials. What do we do

about that?”

Nothing from the Fools’ Wunderkammer could be removed from the premises. Any attempt would trigger the alarms, flooding the area with security golems, and the removed item would be whisked back to its original location.

Solomon pulled out a bundle of papers from a drawer. “These will make a copy of any flat surface they’re pressed against. We’ve been using them to copy texts from the Wunderkammer whenever we need something.”

“Oho, that’s useful. I see. Definitely easier than transcribing by hand.” Accepting the bundle, Mira took one of the sheets and looked it over front and back, admiring what appeared to be a regular blank piece of paper. This was new to her.

“Oh, one other thing,” said Solomon. “To get down to the third level, you’ll need Firefly Ore from the Raggett Copper Mine. It only lasts for twelve hours after it’s excavated.”

Mira knew that the Raggett Copper Mine was dug in the side of a mountain, and it was a ten-hour round trip.

He sat down across from Mira and folded his hands beneath his nose, elbows on the desk, eyes sparkling. He seemed to be emulating a well-known commander.

“What? You want me to go fetch that too?” She scowled at him with annoyance.

“No, no, no. I wouldn’t send you all the way out there. I’ll be sending someone else. Garrett did return with you, after all, and he can make the trip there and back in three hours if he takes the FAV.”

“Great. So, I just need to be ready for when he returns. Fine. When are we expecting him back?” Mira assumed that without the Firefly Ore, there was no point in immediately heading to the Fools’ Wunderkammer.

Solomon smiled devilishly. “Well, this was all a bit sudden, see? And we don’t have the extra manpower at the moment.”

He explained that the military was currently short-staffed and on high alert in

order to deal with hordes of monsters. This was only amplified by the increased incursions of said monsters throughout the continent and great beasts wandering from their established territories. Some areas had guard details consisting of just four combat-ready soldiers. Raggett Copper Mine, too, was short on protection, so Garrett couldn't go to the mines alone.

Then Solomon let slip his true intentions. "It would also be the perfect test for the FAV's ability to negotiate steep terrain." He glanced at Mira with hope-filled eyes.

"I'm not riding in that thing again." Just the mention of the armored car summoned up vivid flashbacks, and she purposely avoided his gaze. Mira summoned a Dark Knight and said, "This is the only armor I need."

Armor spirits were among the most versatile of the lower-level summons. Depending on instructions, they could serve as escorts or even act autonomously. Mira's in particular had accumulated an incredible amount of experience under her control and thus exercised even more freedom.

"Oh, perfect. That should do nicely. Thank you," Solomon said almost automatically as he looked at the summoned knight with satisfaction. It seemed like he'd planned for this to happen. "Let's hurry up and see it off, then."

He stood and made his way out of the archives, leaving Mira and Luminaria to trail after him a moment later.

The group made its way to a garage that Mira was well acquainted with. Three soldiers saluted as Solomon and Luminaria entered, one of them being Vice Commander Garrett. The other two men looked younger and seemed unaccustomed to their uniforms—privates, perhaps. Behind the three sat the FAV, ready and waiting to go. Mira's face twisted as she laid eyes on it.

"At ease," Solomon said before giving Mira a pointed glance.

On cue, she summoned a Dark Knight with increased duration and stamina, intended for escort duties. The privates were rattled by its sudden appearance.

"This is the fourth member of your mission. Play nice," Solomon joked.

After a crisp salute paired with a chorus of "Yes, sir!" Garrett murmured approvingly at the Dark Knight while his team loaded some sort of prospecting

instrument into the FAV. Then all four members climbed in themselves.

After that, they set off with the Vice Commander at the wheel.

Having finished their business at the garage, Mira and her two friends headed to Solomon's private dining room for lunch. It would be three or four hours before the team returned, giving them plenty of time to eat, discuss, and plan. Lunch at the palace was a sumptuous affair, and an hour later, Mira collapsed onto one of the dining room's sofas as she tried to digest.

"You don't have to gorge yourself like that. It won't be the last time we ever serve lunch, you know," Solomon said, handing her a glass of water and sitting down beside her.

"I couldn't help myself..."

Sitting up slightly, she took a sip and then passed it back with a rueful grin as she fell back down on the sofa.

"Remember that time the three of us went to that all-you-can-eat vegetarian buffet?" Luminaria asked, gently rubbing Mira's tummy.

"Oh, that's right. Mira did the same thing back then. Just because it's vegetarian doesn't mean it's healthy to overeat."

The two chuckled at the memory while Mira rolled over and pouted.

"Hush, both of you."

Chapter 14

AFTER DEPARTING from Lunatic Lake, passing through the grasslands to the southeast and the forest beyond, the FAV finally began to climb the mountains. Garrett stomped the accelerator to the floor and clung to the steering wheel as he white-knuckled through the trackless terrain. As the vehicle bounced and rattled, the two privates didn't say a peep. They just clung to the motionless Dark Knight and tried to endure as the FAV picked its way up the mountainside.

The entrance to the Raggett Copper Mine was marked by abandoned huts and overgrown vegetation that showed how long the mine had been closed. The two young soldiers stared into the gaping black maw of the mine shaft, silent and trembling. Behind them, the Dark Knight stood ever vigilant.

"We know what we're after?" Garrett called out to the pair as he finished locking up the FAV.

"Sir, yes, sir!" they responded in unison.

"And we've got our mining gear?"

"Yes, sir! Fully prepared!"

The hunt for Firefly Ore was on. It glowed like a red flame when exposed to air, but only for twelve hours after it was mined. Once it lost potency, it would no longer open the third level of the Fools' Wunderkammer. Therefore, it had to be mined only when it was required.

"There haven't been any reports of monsters in the vicinity, but there've been a lot of strange happenings recently. Keep your eyes peeled while you work."

"Yes, sir! Always watchful and vigilant!"

This was the privates' first mission, and it was clear that they were nervous. Unseen monsters aside, their anxiety also stemmed from their commanding officer. Garrett was the Vice Commander of the Alcait Mobile Armored Division, and he vastly outranked them. To make matters worse, he was acting like rank didn't matter.

Look at them, so worked up over their first mission. Was I ever like that? he

mused as he proceeded into the mine shaft. "Off we go!"

With the mine clear of monsters, nothing hindered their search. Garrett's team soon obtained the Firefly Ore without incident, and they turned to leave the caverns in high spirits.

Suddenly, a quick wind blew around them, and a black shadow raced past from their rear. The Dark Knight had passed them by, moving at tremendous speed. Garrett and the soldiers looked at each other in confusion before they realized that only one thing would have made it move like that. It was their protection detail, after all.

Calming their racing hearts, the three men grabbed their weapons and faced the direction the knight had run off to. Just beyond the entrance to the mine, the Dark Knight was facing off against a giant beast that was trampling over the thick vegetation.

Garrett gasped as he identified the foe. "Th-that's a beast fiend!"

More specifically, it was an Arcus Grage, a bearlike beast that dwarfed the FAV. Unlike most monsters, which spawned almost spontaneously, fiends were wild animals that had been corrupted by evil. Though uncommon, they were incredibly dangerous and difficult opponents. None of the soldiers were particularly skilled at dismounted combat, and this was a major threat.

The great, black Arcus Grage roared and then charged the Dark Knight. With a gaping mouth filled with reddish-black fangs, it moved far faster than its bulk should allow. An instant later, it lunged for the knight's neck.

With the beast upon it, the knight brought up its black greatsword with a fierce thrust and stabbed at the chin of the fiend. A high-pitched sound rang out as the sharp fangs dragged across the mighty sword and the two unnaturally strong combatants struggled for dominance.

But a moment later, there came a terrifying metallic sound. The Arcus Grage had locked the knight's sword in its jaws, then slashed out with its vicious claws to attack the summon's torso. Both the summon's legs stood planted to the ground, but the spirit was stock-still. As the soldiers looked on helplessly, the

fiend trampled the remains of the knight and then lunged at them.

Garrett couldn't believe what he just saw. He'd traveled with Mira. He *knew* what her Dark Knights were capable of. But he also knew his men were in imminent danger. Without hesitating, he shouted orders. "Fall back into the mine! Hurry!"

They wouldn't stand a chance going head-to-head against a foe that could destroy a Dark Knight, but luckily for them, the mine tunnel was too narrow for the Arcus Grage to travel through. If they could make it there, they could avoid the worst. It was their only option.

Turning away from the fiend, Garrett rallied the two young soldiers and spurred them to run. Screaming in panic, they took off toward the mine shaft, just several meters away.

The fiend closed the gap in an instant, and they could hear and feel its slavering breath behind them.

Meanwhile, in the dining room at the Palace of Alcait...

"Hng...?!"

While chatting with her two closest friends after her overindulgence, Mira suddenly felt something and shot to her feet.

"What is it?" Solomon asked, confused by the strange mood that seemed to have gripped her.

"I feel like..." Slowly closing her eyes, she looked skyward as though seeing something not meant to be seen. "It can't be! Right now?!"

"Wh-What's going on?!"

"It's a big one!"

Her eyes shot open, and with that, she took off at a sprint toward the restroom.

"It's been thirty years since we last did that. Takes me back." Solomon chuckled contentedly and sank back in his chair as he watched her disappear.

“How big can it be for someone that small, anyway?”

“How many of those little back-and-forths do the two of you have?”
Luminaria asked, looking disgusted but also slightly amused.

Solomon thought for a moment, then he smiled.

“No idea.”

Back at the Raggett Copper Mine...

The labored breath of the fiend washed over Garrett, and the beast’s savage snarl promised only death. As terror gripped him, he made sure that his men made it into the mine shaft first. Watching them disappear ahead of him, he smiled in relief. But as the reddish-black fangs of the Arcus Grage closed in on his back, his imminent demise was unavoidable.

“Hold yer horses, beastie!”

A high-pitched feminine voice rang out from nowhere, accompanied by a dull thud and a loud groan. The grip of terror slipped away, and Garrett turned in disbelief. Feelings of security and protection washed over him—the same sensations he experienced in Mira’s presence.

“But how did she...?” he muttered as a girl flipped down from the treetops.

It wasn’t Mira, that was for sure.

The newcomer had a Chinese flair about her, dressed in a cheongsam with a high collar and slits up the sides. The vivid colors of her dress made it look more suitable for a fancy dress-up party than a fight, and it was accentuated by her hair, which was done up in loops on both sides of her head.

And yet, her poise and grace brought Garrett an indescribable sense of relief, even though they were still on a battlefield.

“I’ve been searchin’ for that beastie for quite some time! You can have any loot, but I wanna take it down!” she said in her distinctive accent, hands clasped together and eyes blazing as she pleaded with Garrett.

In the distance, the Arcus Grage sluggishly picked itself up from the ground

and tried to shake off its daze.

“Have at it,” Garrett said immediately.

He didn’t know how she did it, but he was sold on the girl’s unshakable confidence. Besides, the monster had taken a hit he couldn’t possibly hope to equal.

“Oho! Much thanks!” Her face shone with joy, and after a flicker of movement, she was nose-to-nose with the beast.

“Wait, was that...?” Garrett watched as the girl struck out at the fiend with an explosive move.

[Immortal Arts Movement: Shrinking Earth]

This girl was a sage.

The fierce explosion was accompanied by a deafening roar. She was stronger than Garrett could’ve ever imagined. Though the fiend momentarily staggered after her powerful kick, it quickly reared up on its hind legs and swatted back at the girl with a massive forelimb. The Arcus Grage’s claws sliced through the air, but they came to a stop before finding their prey.

Her hand rested gently on the beast’s paw. Despite her small stature, her power was overwhelming, and the fiend quickly realized it was outclassed. It turned back to Garrett and charged with explosive power, its red eyes locked on the Vice Commander. The beast seemed determined to get a kill before its inevitable defeat.

“Captain Garrett!” one of the privates called out in panic, but he didn’t move.

More precisely, he didn’t have to. The girl in the cheongsam was already in front of him, as if she’d appeared by magic. The fiend panicked, but a body of that size could not be brought to a halt on such short notice. It tried to leap to avoid the girl.

“Too easy, yeah!” She reached out and clenched her fist, stopping the beast in midair.

Garrett could scarcely believe his eyes. Fist still raised, she stared at the fiend with a wide-eyed, manic grin. Then flames covered the sky.



The expanding shockwave shook the earth, the trees, and even the air itself. Then the wind carried away the sparks as the burst of flame dissipated. The black miasma that had grasped the area disappeared as peace and serenity returned. Soon, the sounds of birdsong and insects chirping filled the air once more.

“He wasn’t even that tough...” she muttered in disappointment as she stared at the fiend’s charred remains.

“Thanks for the assist,” Garrett said, but she just looked at him quizzically.

“What d’ya mean?”

“Oh, um... Very well done.” Taking her reaction as humility, he rephrased his statement. But a moment later, he realized she was serious in her question.

“It was nothing. But that knight might be a challenge, yeah?” She looked over Garrett’s shoulder and back to him, ready to throw down. “Definitely a better training buddy than that fiend. I’d like to fight with him.”

That didn’t make sense. The only things behind him were the entrance to the mine and the privates who had fled into it. He wouldn’t describe either of them as a “knight,” and they certainly wouldn’t fare well while going a round with the mysterious sage girl. Then he turned to find the Dark Knight standing there without so much as a scratch on it.

This Dark Knight, summoned to be their escort, had used its inherent mana stores to rebuild itself after it was shattered. Perhaps the armor spirit had been the one to knock the beast away from his back, after all? His appreciation for Mira’s skill continued to grow, even when she wasn’t around.

“Oh. This knight is currently on loan to us as an escort and I don’t have the authority to loan it out for sparring. Terribly sorry,” Garrett said, bowing to the girl.

“Bummer,” she muttered, head drooping in disappointment. From the way she kept glancing at the Dark Knight, it was clear she hadn’t written off the idea entirely. “You aren’t the summoner, then, yeah?”

“If you’re curious about its master, head to Lunatic Lake. That’s where you’ll

find the person who summoned this Dark Knight.” Garrett felt he owed her a debt of gratitude, in any case.

“Lunatic Lake, huh? Nah. Still too early for that, yeah. But maybe someday!”

Then, as if she had tired of the conversation, the girl leapt skyward and disappeared into the forest canopy.

The three soldiers stood grateful, yet completely bewildered.

Chapter 15

MIRA AND HER FRIENDS retired to Solomon's office to enjoy a cup of after-lunch tea. Whenever all three were together—and alone—the stories flew fast and furious, and they found themselves getting worked up over even the most trivial matters.

It was during this precious bonding time that Garrett came back from his quest.

"Mission complete, Your Majesty."

"Good work. You've done well." Solomon praised him as he checked the freshly excavated Firefly Ore safely secured in a black bag.

Garrett saluted, then turned to Mira and formally bowed. "Miss Mira, thank you for lending us the use of your Dark Knight."

"Hmmm, don't mention it. But..." Mira was relaxing cross-legged on the sofa, but her eyes were sharp as she stared at the Dark Knight standing behind him. "The knight's vigilance leveled up. What might've caused that?" She shifted her gaze back to Garrett as she traced her chin with a fingertip.

The vigilance level was one of the unique features separating Dark Knight escorts from the standard spirits. A summoner could expend extra mana to increase the Dark Knight's lifespan and give it advanced regeneration. Furthermore, this armor spirit had the ability to learn. It could analyze the circumstances of its destruction and reform with armaments to confront the situation properly.

Obviously, such a change didn't go unnoticed to Mira, who was intimately familiar with her Dark Knights. In this case, the changes were clear: The knight's armor was thicker, and there was a longsword at its waist in addition to the greatsword it normally carried.

"I see. So it's got a vigilance system, eh?" Garrett said, slowly understanding why the knight's appearance had changed. "This will also be included in my report."

He went on to mention the beast fiend and the sage who had easily defeated it. As Mira, Solomon, and Luminaria listened to Garrett's report, they focused more on the description of the girl than the fiend.

"Thank you, Vice Commander. We'll go over the details later. You're dismissed."

"Yes, Your Majesty. By your leave." Garrett saluted once more and then left the office. The Dark Knight vanished into particles of light as it was also dismissed.

"So what do you think?" Solomon asked, leaning forward with his hands folded on his desk as the door closed.

"It's got to be Meilin. I can't imagine anyone else who looks and talks that way."

"People say the same thing about you. But the evidence lines up, I agree. It has to be her."

A girl in a cheongsam who triumphed over a fiend with ease using her command of the immortal arts, and who spoke in a peculiar manner. There was no mistaking who their mystery sage must be: the Wise Man of Immortality, Meilin the Controlling Fist.

"From the sound of it, she's off on another one of her warrior's training journeys," Solomon said, walking over to his office window and staring out in the direction of the Raggett Copper Mine with a small smile.

It sounded like Meilin had come to the region just to fight the fiend. But she was always quick on her feet. With her goal achieved, she was probably back on the hunt for another "training partner." Even if they sent a search party, she'd be long gone.

"No doubt, knowing her. Though if she's going to come this close to the palace, it would've been nice of her to drop in and say hello," Mira muttered as she put her shoes back on. It would have saved her a lot of trouble hunting Meilin down later, in any case.

"Well, nothing we can do about it now. And the title of Wise Man is a heavy burden. She comes back now, and that's the end of her training. She'd be stuck,

like me,” Luminaria said with a shrug and a self-deprecating chuckle.

“According to the report, she said, ‘Maybe someday,’ right? So, if we wait, she’ll come back on her own, won’t she?” Mira asked, hoping this problem would solve itself.

“Perhaps. But she’s also the sort to forget responsibilities when she gets fixated on something else.” Solomon left the window and settled back into his office chair, side-eyeing the other two. “If only I had someone more reliable.”

“I know, right? All of them out there wandering about somewhere? If only we could find them,” Mira griped.

“At least you get to travel. I’m stuck here all on my lonesome,” Luminaria said sullenly. “Won’t they think of poor old me?”

“Why don’t we put a pin in this conversation before the Firefly Ore cools off?” Solomon said, cutting them off with a kindly smile.

After learning how to disarm the device guarding the third floor of the Fools’ Wunderkammer, Mira left for the academy with the Firefly Ore in tow. It was just after three o’clock in the afternoon, and the main street was packed with students returning home after their classes.

Fighting against the stream of people pouring out of the gates, Mira remembered her visit from the other day and dipped into one of the school buildings to search for Cleos.

Hmm, not here. I figured he’d be stuck doing overtime.

After a short walk through the building, up the stairs, and down the hallway—only getting slightly lost—she found the summoning classroom. But when she stood on her tiptoes to peek inside, she didn’t see anyone there.

Hmmm. What’s that sound?

Instead of tracking down the headmaster to help hunt for Cleos, she decided to investigate. Opening the door, she saw that the room was indeed empty. But the sound continued unabated.

Maybe it’s farther in?

Straining her ears, she noticed it was emanating from behind a door in the corner of the room. As she approached, the sound became louder, and she could hear voices mixed in. Some of those voices were familiar. Deciding that Cleos must be somewhere beyond, Mira opened the door to find a set of stairs leading down.

When she reached the bottom, Mira found herself in what appeared to be a training area. The room was awash with magic and the sound of clashing metal, and sure enough, Cleos was there with Hinata and ten students.

And twelve Dark Knights.

Compared to her own, the Dark Knights standing beside the students were definitely looking worse for wear. These spirits had clearly been summoned with brand-new contracts. On the other hand, Professor Hinata's knight stood tall and cut a splendid figure. Cleos's was as regal as any knight commander.

It seemed she was interrupting a mentoring session for new summoners. The knights belonging to Cleos and Hinata were engaged in battle, and Cleos was giving a running explanation. The lesson seemed to be focused on teaching the newbies the basics of how to control their armor spirits.

Good to see them teaching the fundamentals.

Mira watched the lesson with a swelling sense of pride, but then the eloquent commentary cut off. Hinata asked Cleos if there was an issue, but his eyes were fixed on Mira, his mouth hanging open. Following his gaze, the students turned around, wondering what was going on, only to see a small girl peeking into the training room from the entrance.

"Mira!" Hinata called out happily, bounding toward her. The students promptly started gossiping, trying to determine whether she was a new student or Cleos's illegitimate child.

"Hrmm. Sorry about that. Didn't mean to interrupt the lesson."

"Don't worry about it! We're glad to have you here!" Hinata said with a smile, her tail standing tall as she took Mira's hand and pulled her into the room. Then she spun back toward the students with a fresh spring in her step.

"Everyone! Let me introduce you. This is Mira, who took first place at the last

Spell Symposium!”

Hinata held up a finger to represent number one, beaming and boasting as though it had been her own achievement.

“Hi. I’m Mira. Nice to meet you all,” Mira said, trying to maintain her dignity before the students. On closer inspection, the students appeared to be of all ages.

Stepping close, Cleos bowed and then added to the introduction. He told the students that not only was she the pupil of Master Danblf, but that she also provided the tools that allowed them to learn the summoning arts.

A buzz broke out among the students, which slowly built up into an enthusiastic round of applause. To them, Mira was the savior who kept their discipline alive. The applause gave way to scattered cheering before one student piped up, their eyes glimmering with hope and respect.

“Um, Miss Mira! Might you show us your armor spirits?!”

The cheers immediately shifted into cries of agreement.

“Well, I don’t see why not!” Magic circles appeared either side of her, and a Dark Knight and Holy Knight emerged from within.

Mira stood there fearlessly with her chest puffed out as the students marveled at her ability to cast without any incantation. They just happened instantly, effortlessly. Even more impressively, her summons were in leagues of their own when it came to their appearance. It was as if their forms channeled the divinity of ancient heroes and dreaded berserkers.

“Whoa,” one of the students finally managed to say.

Unfortunately for the students, the difference between their skill levels was so vast that it robbed the demonstration of any educational value.

“No matter how many times I see it, it still amazes me,” Hinata said excitedly with a look of respect.

“Armor spirits are the foundation of the art of summoning,” Mira replied as she dismissed her two knights, flattered by the honest praise. Then she summoned another two Dark Knights simultaneously, their greatswords

swinging toward each other.

The blades whooshed through the air. As the swords met, the metal screeched and sparks flew. A sudden gust of wind blew through the training room, knocking several students head over heels. The sight of the two knights locked in combat was overwhelming.

“If trained properly, your armor spirits can achieve this level as well. Study hard, and remain diligent!” Mira called out to the new students.

The novices were amazed by this show of power, and the look in their eyes gradually shifted from amazement to aspiration. Armor spirits gained experience as they fought, and the stronger the foe, the faster they grew. The growth might be slow, but it kept building as long as the student kept practicing.

Then one of the students announced that they wanted to square off against Mira’s Dark Knight. They’d learned the basics from Cleos and wouldn’t let the opportunity to gain valuable combat experience against such a strong opponent slip by. Soon, all the students’ voices rose up in a clamor as they demanded their own chances to have a go.

Mira couldn’t let such passion and motivation go unanswered. Dismissing one of her two Dark Knights, she smiled daringly. “All together, then!”

The students’ spirits charged in, and a fierce battle raged around Mira’s lone knight.

A few minutes later, the students lay strewn across the training room floor. Dark Knights only remained summoned so long as the caster had mana, but the students were quickly exhausted, and the few knights fell.

Finally, only one opponent remained—the knight belonging to Hinata. It frantically turned aside a blow from Mira’s summon.

“Oho, not bad!” Mira told Hinata with a smile.

Hinata’s tail flicked back and forth behind her. “I have to show off a little! I am their professor, after all!”

Nevertheless, the difference in power was clear. Mira’s Dark Knight pushed

Hinata's steadily back, then swiftly cut it down. After that, Mira's armor spirit stood alone in the training room. The students cheered in admiration at its stalwart unblemished appearance and overwhelming strength.

Then a dilemma arose within the students. Who was stronger: an Elder's pupil, or an acting Elder? As one, they turned to Cleos.

Picking up on their curiosity, Cleos turned to Mira and bowed. "Why don't we spar?"

Mira agreed immediately. How could she refuse?

And so began the ultimate battle between Dark Knights. Both Mira and Cleos had trained their summons in an elite sword style famous for its emphasis on decisive first strikes. Soon, the blades dancing between the two spirits mesmerized all those watching, and the tremble of air and clashes of noise that accompanied the slashes rang out like peals of thunder. The overwhelming power of the flashing swords left the audience breathless, their cutting blows leaving traces in the air before smashing together. The strikes looked brutal and wild, but each was precisely targeted. The skirmish transcended mock battle, now a duel between two blade masters.

Had it been seconds or minutes? No one could tell. But after a fierce exchange, the battle came to a close. Mira's Dark Knight put everything into its fastest strike, outstripping Cleos's knight, who had attempted the same technique just a fraction of a second slower. Mira's spirit bisected its foe and claimed the victory.

The students were elated, not just from the exhibition, but because they'd learned how powerful a Dark Knight could be.

"I thought I might have had a chance, but I should've known better," Cleos said with a hint of frustration. "Well done, Mistress Mira."

Sensing her friend's feelings, she replied, "Oh, no, you've definitely improved. I hardly recognized your summon!"

He smiled in return. "Thank you very much."

"However, I think you need more combat experience. You should head to the Sword Saint's Shrine. No better place to train an armor spirit," Mira suggested

as casually as if recommending a neighborhood restaurant.

“I’m not sure that’s the best place to train...” Cleos muttered disapprovingly. He had been dragged out there more than a few times in the past.

At that moment, one of the students anxiously piped up. “Um... So I—er, we—might be able to reach your level someday?”

“Cleos and I both started where you are now. Put the effort in and the possibilities are endless,” Mira said, her smile radiating confidence.

“Thank you very much!”

It seemed that was exactly what they needed to hear from a Wise Man’s pupil, and it opened a floodgate of requests and questions from the assembled students. Even Hinata, who had at some point joined the ring of students, was tossing out questions. Mira carefully took the time to go over the important basics of summoning, how to affix their summoning locations, how to train to prepare for simultaneous summoning, and how to best utilize both the Dark Knight and the Holy Knight.

Cleos sighed as he watched her carefully guide the new generation. *I wish I’d had these lessons...* Why couldn’t Mira have been so kind when she was training him? His shoulders slumped as he remembered the harshness of his own education.

Mira’s lecture finally ended when the academy started to shut down for the day, but the evocation students’ faces were filled with hope for the future. One by one, they headed home.

“By the way, what brought you to the academy today? Surely it wasn’t just to check on the new recruits?” Cleos asked as they were straightening up the classroom.

“Oh, that’s right. I’m headed down to the lowest level of the Fools’ Wunderkammer in search of some documents.” Mira pulled out the key that Luminaria had given her.

“Ah, so that’s why you’re here.” Cleos nodded in understanding. Two keys were required for entry to the Wunderkammer; he presumed it was an errand for King Solomon.

“So I’m here to borrow your copy of the key, and—” Mira started, then stopped and stared at Cleos as a thought struck her. She sidled up to the acting Elder before asking, “By the way, do you have any plans after this?”

“No, nothing in particular.” Her face lit up at his response, and he put his cleaning on hold.

“Perfect. Why don’t you join my little adventure?” she asked. The Fools’ Wunderkammer was poorly lit, making for a dim and gloomy dungeon. But that issue could be solved with the addition of one light spirit to the party.

“Sounds interesting. I think I will.” Cleos knew that dungeon delving with Mira—or rather with Danblf, as she used to be—could be a life-threatening experience. But there was also much to be gained. Just being around her counted as training. And so, it was with half nostalgia, half ambition that he expressed his desire to accompany her.

Hinata overheard this little exchange, and this wasn’t something she was prepared to overlook. “Umm... Might I tag along as well?” Hinata asked meekly.

She knew that she would regret missing this opportunity to further her own practical studies. If these two were headed to a dungeon, there would no doubt be battles. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see the two strongest summoners in action.

“Sure, fine by me,” Mira said.

Cleos smiled at Hinata and mouthed, “*Well done.*” Hinata had always been a bit timid, but this time, she had asserted herself. Cleos had known her since she was a student herself, and he was happy to see such growth.

She shyly thanked him, but her perked ears betrayed her joy.

Chapter 16

DEEP BELOW the specialized studies building, the trio stood before a giant door sealed with iron bars.

“We came here to train back when you were starting out, didn’t we? Good times,” Mira commented, looking up at the entrance to the Fools’ Wunderkammer.

“No, I don’t think that was for training, actually. It seemed a bit more... perilous than that.” Cleos’s cheek twitched as he stared vacantly ahead. Those times with Danblf had been...well, they’d been *a lot*.

Hinata wasn’t sure what the two were talking about, but she could tell that Cleos might not share Mira’s nostalgia.

“Now then, Mistress Mira, if you’ll take the right-hand mechanism?” Cleos shook off the past long enough to move to the left side of the door and withdraw a silver key from his breast pocket.

“Hrmm, very well.” Mira took up a position on the opposite side.

“All right, get ready to turn the key...*now*.”

Following his instructions, she turned the key, and they heard a heavy metallic clank. Cleos turned his a moment later, and a sound of gears moving filled the chamber as the iron bars slowly retreated.

“Ladies first,” he said. Grabbing the handle of the now-exposed door, Cleos eased it open, and cold air from the dungeon spilled out over their feet. Hinata shivered.

Past the door was a gently descending tunnel. There were small patches of light here and there, but visibility was generally very poor.

“Cleos, light the way,” Mira said, giving him a wink. It was exactly what she used to say when the two went adventuring together.

“As you wish.” Reveling in the memory, he smiled and created a small sphere of light in his palm before releasing it softly into the air. The orb melted away like sugar in hot tea, its luminescence spreading to fill the space with a growing

light that illuminated every nook and cranny in the cave.

“Wow... It’s so bright,” Hinata said as the tunnel took on a midday glow. Though she had known Cleos for many years and knew he was half elf and half light spirit, she’d never seen him actually use any of his light spirit skills.

Now they could see shelves along either side. They were crammed with research materials and collection samples, and they ran all the way down to the end. Hinata gawked as she took in the dungeon, but Mira and Cleos didn’t seem to be terribly impressed. They steadily made their way deeper and deeper into the room.

The first level of the dungeon was simply a straight path forward with occasional alcoves off to the sides. The alcoves were also lined with shelves, and their floors were littered with decaying samples. Some elements of the Wunderkammer founders’ research had weathered the years better than others, it seemed. Chairs and tables were no longer usable—but the shelves had been enchanted to stay in perfect condition, and any item lucky enough to have been filed away remained pristine. They protected the collection against both decay and theft.

If I remember correctly, the Department of the Ethereal was researching this, Hinata thought as she scanned the cave.

“Looks like we’ve got a bunch up ahead,” Mira told them, looking at the far end of the cave.

“So we do,” Cleos said.

A bunch of what? Hinata wondered, then looked ahead to find her answer. She saw an area about twenty-five meters wide and twenty meters long—and it was currently home to a group of monsters: three doglike Vorax Hounds, three blobby Ragged Oozes, and four treelike Ruffian Woodmen. A fight was incoming, but the monsters hadn’t yet noticed the party.

“Basic mobs. Let’s take care of them and move on.” Mira began to step forward, but Hinata jumped ahead.

“Um, maybe I could show you *my* summoning techniques?” She didn’t mind watching the other two fight, but she was hoping this adventure would earn her

some experience and feedback.

Mira turned to Cleos, and the pair shared a nod.

Taken in by Hinata's enthusiasm, Mira said, "All right, then."

"It's a perfect opportunity," Cleos agreed. This would be a great opportunity to receive constructive criticism from the Elder of the Tower of Evocation herself.

"Thank you. I'll do my best!"

Considering she was being watched by a Wise Man's pupil and an acting Elder, Hinata was feeling nervous but motivated. Then she remembered Mira's spells at the symposium, and her desire to improve ignited. Thus fired up, she concentrated on casting her spell.

"Okay, I'll start with this!"

First, she affixed the summoning location. Then, she selected her summon. She carefully progressed through the steps, making sure not to lose her visualization. Then she applied the necessary mana to the spell, letting it soak in slowly. A magic circle appeared at the designated point. It gradually grew brighter until it flashed red, and she cast the summoning spell.

[Evocation: Salamander]

The magic circle burst open, and flames scattered into the air, revealing a long, stout lizard nearly two meters in length.

"Oho, a salamander! You *did* mention that before, didn't you? So you've climbed Mount Symbios and found the Dragon's Ember?"

"I did, and it was quite the climb!" Hinata said as she hugged her salamander, who was doing its best to stand at attention before her.

Among the spirits that governed over fire, the salamander was one of the more primordial elementals. Salamanders were born from Fairy Crystals that were cast into the Dragon's Ember, an area near the volcanic caldera at the top

of Mount Symbios.

Fairy Crystals were rare, crystallized souls of ancient spirits buried deep within the earth. The cloudy gray crystals were harder than diamond, making them difficult to process, and their lack of attractive color made them worthless as gemstones. They still fetched a decent price—and returning them to the spirits was a way to earn favor and Fairy Blessings, spirit weaponry, or summoning contracts.

“Hrmm, looks good.”

Hinata glowed at Mira’s praise. In spite of the way she was fawning over her summon, the salamander had clear, sharp eyes and looked strong. The fire spirits emerged from the Dragon’s Ember as babies and had to be hand-reared by their summoners. This made them more like pets than spirits. Based on what Mira could see, it was clear Hinata had done a fine job.

“Okay, hairy go... I mean, here we go!” Despite tripping over her tongue, Hinata kicked off the battle.

She and her salamander took the lead, her summon leaping toward the monsters and unleashing its Fire Breath from just outside their attack range. Crimson flames spilled out toward the foes, catching them off guard. With no chance to evade, they cried out in anger as the flames torched their forms and the air around them.

The three Ragged Oozes—particularly vulnerable to fire—were instantly burnt to a crisp. But the agile Vorax Hounds suffered only minor burns, and the Ruffian Woodmen escaped danger thanks to the flame-resistant moss blanketing their bark. The seven remaining monsters turned their attention to the salamander and looked for an opening to attack.

Hinata’s salamander was the first to move. It spat flame with a bestial roar, and the ground shook as it charged. Not to be outdone, the monsters bellowed and counterattacked as one. The battle quickly devolved into a melee. The monsters besieged the salamander from all sides, clambering onto its back and forcing it to knock them off with a swipe of its tail. When they bit it, it bit back. When they cornered it, bursts of flame kept them at bay. It was like a heavy tank, using its bulk to meet and drive back the enemy.

Through valiant effort, the salamander whittled down the opposing monsters until only one Ruffian Woodman remained. The gnarled, walking tree eyed the salamander warily. Its moss covering made it resistant to fire, but not immune. In a flash, the monster thrust out a wooden arm sharpened to a spearpoint, but before it could land the strike, the salamander lunged. With a dull crash and the sound of snapping limbs, the enemy toppled to the ground. Immediately, the salamander was upon it, snapping away with its flame-wreathed maw.

The monstrous tree struggled, but moments later, the fire bloomed. The salamander's fangs had pierced the moss, and the Ruffian Woodman was burning to ash from within. Ten foes defeated, the salamander triumphantly trotted back to Hinata's side.

"What a good job! You did so well!" she said, hugging and petting her summon, which seemed to enjoy the praise. She then dismissed the salamander and turned to Mira and Cleos. "Erm, how was that?"

"The Fire Breath was quite impressive. It was strong enough to pass as an advanced technique. But the sluggishness concerned me somewhat. I think the two of you should work on agility drills a bit more," Cleos said honestly.

"Quite right," Mira agreed. "It worked out all right this time, but salamanders don't have the toughest defenses. They should keep moving to avoid being surrounded."

"Work on agility. Got it," Hinata said, pulling out a small notepad and jotting down the advice.

"Also, has your salamander not learned Flame Armor yet? It's useful both defensively and offensively. Oh, and something else to consider..."

Mira started to ramble on about salamanders, listing key characteristics, advantages, weaknesses, and effective training strategies. Hinata's eyes sparkled as she copied it all down into her notepad. Even Cleos listened in with a slightly more serious expression than normal.

"Thank you so much. This will be a big help." Hinata smiled, overjoyed with the wealth of knowledge Mira had shared with her.

"That's Mast—Mistress Mira to you." Cleos caught himself just in time,

wishing that Danblf would have been so free with his lectures when *he* had been a young summoner. “Such a wealth of knowledge.”

“I’m still learning myself,” Mira told the two, shooting a glance at Cleos. She realized that this was the first time she was having such in-depth conversations about spells and techniques with former NPCs. “Let’s keep helping each other out, right?”

He’s now the acting Elder on my behalf. It’s quite amazing how times change and people grow.

She smiled like a proud grandparent watching their grandchild grow up.

Chapter 17

WITH THE IMPROMPTU salamander review complete, it was time for the party to press on. They shuffled through the area at the end of the first level, which was now coated in ash.

After a dozen or so meters, they came to a metal door. It was plain and unadorned, but when Cleos pulled the handle, it opened with a sound of a person sobbing. Passing through, they entered the second level of the dungeon. Unlike the prior cavern, this level was a large circular hall masterfully constructed from stone blocks. Thanks to Cleos's special ability, the room was well lit—a far cry from its usual darkness. They could see more of the endless shelves arrayed throughout the room, their contents in perfect condition. They were arranged in lines from the center to a ring around the perimeter. A bird's-eye view of the scene would've resembled a cross-section of an orange.

Mira, Cleos, and Hinata made their way through the room while glancing at the strange and incomprehensible specimens that filled the shelves. In the center of the circular room was a hole, roughly five meters in diameter. When they peered down into it, they could see a spiral staircase leading deeper underground.

The second level of the Wunderkammer was somewhat like the inverse of the Silver Towers—instead of rising into the sky, ring-shaped levels were stacked atop one another as they descended into the earth. Hinata followed the other two down the staircase, gazing at each floor with wonder and curiosity.

The combination of dim light and the strange oddities on display should have made for an eerie, ominous atmosphere. But thanks to Cleos, everything was clear and plain to see, making it feel more like a disorganized museum. His light also made it obvious where the monsters were located.

Huge Slimes stuck to the walls, Shadow Panthers hid in the gaps between the stacks, Strigoi Bats hung from the ceilings, and Armored Pythons patrolled the perimeters. Quite the array of monsters, now all nicely illuminated and revealed.

“Here’s a thought. Cleos, why don’t you show us *your* salamander? That way, we can compare,” Mira suggested, watching monsters from the top of the spiral staircase. “I’d say this is a perfect opportunity.”

“You want to compare?” As far as Cleos was concerned, he’d much rather see Mira’s. Begrudgingly, he thought it might be more meaningful that way.

Mira smiled. “I’m curious to see how much you’ve improved,” she said, egging him on.

Cleos’s hesitation was swept aside by a prideful determination. He nodded and took a step forward. “Very well, then. Leave it to me!”

Focusing on an open spot between the monsters below, he cast his summoning spell. Like before, the magic circle burst into flames, and a salamander emerged from the sparks. It was twice the size of Hinata’s, with powerful limbs and an unusually long tail. It was clearly well trained, with an emphasis on mobility.

Hinata gasped. “It’s totally different...” Unlike her own adorable salamander, Cleos’s was striking and dignified, and the stark difference left her reeling.

“It all comes down to raising and training. We just have to keep getting better,” Mira said, giving Hinata an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

“Right, got it,” Hinata replied, her tail raising as her spirits lifted.

“All right, here goes.” After listening in on their conversation with just a touch of envy, Cleos instructed his summoned spirit to start the battle.

Then, his salamander disappeared...or at least, it appeared to. Hinata realized that it had moved with such speed that she struggled to keep it in sight.

“Whoa...” The word slipped from her mouth. In only a few moments, Cleos’s salamander had already roasted, slashed, and defeated *all* of the monsters on one floor. Five monsters, gone in the blink of an eye.

“Now then, on to the next floor.”

At Cleos’s command, the salamander returned to his side and proceeded down the spiral staircase in the vanguard position. As the three followed, it cloaked itself in fire using its Flame Armor ability and charged into the next

formation of monsters. Like a hunter, it pounced from foe to foe, leaving a trail of flames in its wake, spreading its bewitching yet terrifying inferno.

Huge Slimes tried spraying it with their digestive fluids, but the salamander burnt them to a crisp with a single puff of fire. Shadow Panthers used everything around them as a foothold as they attempted to evade, but they, too, were outmaneuvered and roasted. Meanwhile, Strigoi Bats tried attacking from the salamander's blind spot, but they were struck down by its whip-like tail. The prized carapaces of the Armored Pythons were quickly reduced to ash.

The salamander's flashy, efficient moves were truly a sight to behold.

"Oho, you've done pretty well for yourself," Mira commented, looking slightly impressed.

"Pretty well"...? Hinata thought incredulously. *How was that anything less than amazing?!*

Cleos beamed with joy. "Thank you very much."

Its task complete, the salamander was dismissed. Hinata watched it vanish, praying that her own little salamander could grow up to be like that one day. With nothing left to impede their progress, the three made it to the bottom of the spiral staircase soon thereafter.

On the bottom floor, there were neither shelves nor racks, just a large stone platform sitting in the middle of the room.

"Hmmm, this must be it."

There was a small depression in the middle of the platform. Based on Solomon's description, this was the mechanism that opened the passage to the deepest level of the dungeon. After checking it over, Mira fit the Firefly Ore into the socket. As she did, the ore's pale glow slowly spread to cover the entirety of the stone platform. It continued onward, extending across the floor and coalescing into multiple lines of light that climbed the surrounding walls. Eventually, the light gathered, forming a glowing rectangle on one of the walls.

Oho, going all out on the presentation! Mira thought, watching the rectangle excitedly.

The entire second level of the dungeon began to tremble as the rectangle grew brighter and brighter, building toward a climax. Then there was a dull thud.

“Ahem. Mistress Mira, Professor Hinata...behind you.” Cleos smiled apologetically as the pair still stared at the shining rectangle.

“Huh?”

Spinning around, they saw a door-shaped hole in the wall. The light show had been nothing but a stunt.

Hinata laughed, and Mira gave the glowing rectangle a sour look before sweeping past Cleos and through the hidden door. They walked down a narrow corridor for about ten meters, then descended a staircase, which led to a large room. The surrounding walls were formed of large, roughly stacked stone blocks and the ceiling above was rough-hewn rock. Countless scars littered the flat floor.

The room was about twice the size of a school gymnasium, and at the far end was a large metal gate with two colossal knight statues standing to either side.

“Well, those are obviously going to move,” Mira said, putting a finger to her chin as she looked at the two statues.

“You are correct. First the one with the sword and shield will come to life, followed by the other with the halberd.”

“Hrmm. Knew it. Facing a new foe always gets the heart racing.” Mira daringly stepped forward. “This should be fun. I’ll handle this.”

“Of course,” Cleos replied, stepping back.

Even when she was Danblf, Mira preferred taking on new enemies alone so that she could better understand their behavior and characteristics. Despite the surge of nostalgia, he made sure to stay focused so that he wouldn’t miss a single movement.

“Keep a close eye on how she fights, Miss Hinata. It will offer us a glimpse into just how far summoning might take us,” he said, his face set more seriously than ever before. His own abject curiosity was unbridled.

“Y-yes, sir.” Taken aback by his unusual intensity, she nodded vigorously and stared out at Mira.

All right, so they’re basically golems, Mira thought.

Golems were resistant to fire, but after Hinata’s and Cleos’s displays, she couldn’t *not* summon her own salamander.

Decision made, the rest came swiftly. One of the giant knight statues broke its silence just as a magic circle sprang into being, and her salamander leapt out of the crimson flames. Mira’s salamander had a cracked black hide with crimson light seeping through the open spaces like magma. Scorching breath spilled from its mouth, and its limbs were thick and long. At first glance, it looked less like a giant lizard and more like a wingless dragon.

Before the magic circle had finished burning away, the salamander struck first with its thick tail. The statue took the brutal blow and rolled across the floor, sending shards of stone flying.

“B-bwhaaa...?” Hinata had been stunned before, but now all she could do was stammer unintelligibly at the sight. The power difference was too great. She had no possible frame of reference.

Meanwhile, the battle between the salamander and the colossus raged on. The knight statue regained its footing and charged with unexpected agility considering its stone physique. Each step shook the room and amplified its force. A wild swing of its sword was so powerful, it shattered the ground where it struck.

Despite wielding its colossal sword with skill, it failed to so much as graze the salamander. Agile as the stone construct was, the salamander was far more mobile. Using its powerful legs to leap into the air, the elemental controlled its trajectory by expelling flames from all along its body. Even without wings, it flew like some sort of nightmare on jets of fire.

The giant knight swung its sword, but the nimble salamander fine-tuned its approach, slipping through a gap and crunching its crimson-fanged jaws onto the statue’s arm. Despite losing an arm, the knight refused to give in. It tried to bring its shield to bear, but the battle was already decided.

Flames erupted from its shattered arm, growing in intensity until they blew the limb right off the statue's shoulder. The colossus shuddered and then collapsed to the ground. But the flames didn't stop. They spread across the body, destroying both the head and the torso as they consumed the stone in a hellish inferno. Eventually, even the legs crumbled, leaving nothing but a sword and a shield resting in a pile of ash.

Just then, a halberd's blade pierced the billowing cloud of dust. The second knight statue was on the move. Despite the reduced visibility, the statue's aim was true—but it didn't meet its mark, as the elemental had already sprung back into action. The halberd gouged into the ground before it fell from the knight's grasp and clattered to the floor. As the dust settled, the second colossus fell apart into six piles of burning rubble. The salamander landed squarely before Mira.

"Hrmm, well done." She praised her mischievous salamander and reached up to pat the tip of its snout, eliciting a happy purr from the elemental.

"Simply marvelous, Mistress Mira! Always showing us new things!" Cleos exclaimed with the utmost joy as the salamander was dismissed.

Meanwhile, Hinata was left speechless. She didn't even know what she was supposed to learn from the demonstration. It left a permanent impression in her mind, a new benchmark for her aspirations, a goal to strive for...

But she couldn't begin to understand *how* Mira did it.

Chapter 18

PASSING THROUGH the now-unguarded gate, the party entered the final level of the dungeon and the target of Mira's adventure. There were faint trickles of light here and there, like will-o'-wisps floating around. The dim lighting made it hard to gauge distance, but the room was clearly quite large.

Then Cleos's ability rippled through the room, banishing the darkness. It spread throughout the area, bringing everything into focus until all was lit. Mira took in the scene before her, while Hinata could only stare, dumbfounded. It was so vast that it could probably contain an entire village.

"Well, this alone made the journey worthwhile," Mira remarked. "This room certainly puts the 'wunder' in Wunderkammer."

"Up to this point, it was just run-of-the-mill storerooms." Cleos looked around in awe as well. "But this... No wonder they were called fools."

The shelves, although evenly arrayed throughout the cavernous space, were stacked haphazardly and crammed with a seemingly random assortment of books, specimens, and all sorts of other things. Some were well past capacity, and a number of items had spilled onto the floor, left to decompose through the passing years. Despite the gloom, the deeper reaches of the room seemed completely overgrown with vegetation. Yet the shelves and the items stored upon them were miraculously undamaged.

In the center of the room, shelves were stacked into a colossal tower, and the tower itself was further ringed by more shelves. It was part library, part museum, part eccentric construction project.

"It would take forever to search through all this." Mira sighed, her purpose for coming at odds with her desire to freely explore.

"That's right, we're here in search of specific titles. What were they again?" Cleos asked, shaking off his wonder.

"These." Mira pulled the memo with the necessary titles from her pouch and passed it over.

“I’ll take care of it.” He took a moment to absorb the contents. “These all seem to be related to flora of the southern regions. Let’s see, those are in section six, which should be...”

Walking over to the side of the entrance, he looked up from the paper at a large board posted on the wall.

Following his gaze, Mira looked on, slack-jawed. “What the heck is that? Is that seriously a directory in a dungeon?!”

“It’s classified as a dungeon now...but it used to just be a museum. Well, warehouse, really. Either way, it was a place for the knowledge-obsessed to enjoy themselves.”

“And this is just what’s left of it.” Mira felt the call of adventure stir within her, only for it to be tempered by the humanity of the setting. This had once been a place for people, not monsters and mazes.

“They should be around there,” Cleos said, indicating an area on the map. It was labeled *Section 6, Terrestrial Plants*. Based on the map, the area in question would be located all the way opposite the entrance.

“That’s a fair way off. It’d be faster to fly there,” Mira muttered. Despite the clutter, the entrance had a raised vantage point, offering a good view of their surroundings. In the distance, she could just make out one area that was thickly covered in vegetation.

“As much as I can understand the desire, Mistress Mira, we mustn’t. You should read this.” Cleos pointed to a corner of the map where a sentence was written in incredibly small print:

Deviation from approved routes will activate security systems.

Looking somewhat embarrassed, he went on, “The first time I came down to this level, everything got out of hand. First, swarms of golems came raining down on us, and then security walls started popping up all over the place. It was a mess. So, no flying.”

On closer inspection, there were little arrows drawn to mark out the route.

“Well, if we must.” Shifting her gaze from the distant Section 6 to the

descending stairs marking the beginning of the route, Mira thought this might be a proper dungeon experience after all.

Guide maps were stationed at regular intervals along the path, significantly cutting down on the sense of adventure. But Mira refused to let that diminish her experience as she made her way along the passages cutting through the towering aisles of shelves. Side passageways led to sets of stairs here and there, and bridges overhead stretched between the tops of the shelves.

If she were to take those stairs or cross those bridges, where might they lead? The mystery tickled her inner explorer, but unfortunately, the answers to those questions were always clearly marked on the maps. Feeling a bit miffed, Mira took out her frustrations on the occasional monster that crossed their path.

“Hrmm? Why is this closed?” The route had led them to a double door that was firmly bolted shut. It would be impossible to pry open.

“The innermost areas are sealed off by section. To progress further, we’ll have to solve the puzzle,” Cleos said, pointing to a pedestal placed by the door.

Atop the pedestal sat a metallic cube. Looking closely, Mira saw that each side of the cube was separated into a five-by-five grid, and each individual piece had a design carved into it. All in all, there seemed to be six different designs scattered throughout the cube on different pieces.

Despite the puzzle having shapes instead of colors, Mira immediately recognized the cube blocking their way. “Puzzle? This is just a Rubi—” She clamped her mouth shut. Indeed, it was a Rubik’s Cube. With an annoyed look, she turned to Cleos. “A five-by-five, though... That’s a bit rough. What do you think?”

A five-by-five cube was incredibly more difficult than the standard three-by-three. These sorts of puzzles were never her forte.

“It’s not that I can’t do it, but it would probably take me somewhere around six hours to complete,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“Six hours...?”

They weren’t in any particular hurry, but that was still far too long to spend on just a puzzle. Just as irritation set in, Mira heard a loud bang, and some

hidden mechanism stirred to life. The door unbolted and opened slowly.

“Hrmm? It’s opening?”

Mira spotted Hinata staring at it, and the professor’s tail shot out behind her in surprise as they locked eyes. The professor quickly placed the completed puzzle in her hands back on the pedestal as her cheeks reddened.

“Did you just solve that?” Cleos asked, gawking at her.

“I’m pretty good at puzzles. I was thinking I might be able to help...”

“Absolutely marvelous! A godsend!”

“Hrmm, agreed. Where did you pick up such a skill?”

Hinata’s tail slowly rose and she smiled happily at the unexpected praise. As they walked through the door, Hinata explained that with so much free time at the academy, she’d taken up solving puzzles to keep her mind sharp. Professor Siegfried from the Department of Sorcery had helped out by lending her and recommending his favorites.

After solving so many different puzzles, she’d developed a knack for it.

“Ah, I see.” Cleos gave a strained smile. Not exactly how he’d like to see his professors pass their time, but he couldn’t necessarily protest, given the poor state summoning had been in.

The next area appeared to be dedicated to marine biology. The shelves were stacked high and covered in thick vegetation. Huge aquariums took up the space between them.

“It’s like we’re lost deep in the ocean,” Mira murmured in admiration, peering into one of the tanks. Fish swam around inside among shimmering aquatic plants. The tank had formed its very own isolated universe.

“Even the palace scholars were surprised by these. They estimated these micro-ecosystems are over a thousand years old.”

“A thousand years? Quite the archeological discovery.”

Ecological as well. Mira knew this world operated on slightly different rules than her home world, but this section was a biological *and* historical wonder.

Naturally, like the rest of the materials in the dungeon, the tanks were guarded against theft so researchers couldn't even open the aquariums, much less remove them.

Intrigued, she stared intently into the tank. Hinata was also staring at the fish, but her cat eyes seemed less focused on the historical value and more on the...*culinary* opportunities.

This section also contained many skeletal remains of giant creatures, as well as taxidermy specimens. Another guide map was affixed to the wall. Deciding to enjoy her surroundings as a museum rather than a dungeon, Mira left the monster-handling to her Dark Knights and let Cleos lead the way while she looked around at this and that.

Behind her, Hinata carefully watched the armor spirits as they went about the grim business of slaying any monsters that tried to ambush the party, and she took down detailed notes as she observed. This also helped to distract her from the seafood on display.

The path took them up ladders, over fish tanks, across bridges, down stairs, and ever onward. Finally, they arrived at a chasm preventing them from proceeding.

"I don't think this is supposed to be the end," said Mira, looking things over.

A descending switchback staircase nearby led to a complicated-looking mechanism. It controlled a bridge supported by pillars rising up from below. But it was no ordinary bridge—it was made up of different-sized blocks. Some were straight, while others were L-shaped, and they formed five columns and ten rows. Fifty levers stuck out of an adjacent pedestal. This puzzle was clearly the barrier to the next section.

"Not *this* again," Mira groaned.

Cleos explained the rules. "So for this puzzle, the position of the bridge corresponds to the levers. Flipping a lever causes a piece to spin 90 degrees, the neighboring pieces to spin 90 degrees in the opposite direction, and the pieces one step beyond that to spin 90 degrees in the same direction as the first piece."

The rules were simple enough, but the challenge came from the number of pieces that moved with each pull of a lever. Mira was sure she could solve it if she had to, but she couldn't bring herself to bother with it.

She sighed. "All right, I get how it works. How long did it take you to solve it?"

"This took me three hours," Cleos replied, somewhat proudly. Less than the last puzzle, but three hours was still a long time to wait.

"Hmmm. Hinata?"

"Well, I've never done one quite like this, but...I think I can probably solve it." Hinata looked out at the bridge and the levers as she thought back over the rules.

"It would definitely be a big help. Can we leave it to you?"

"I'm on it!" She nodded happily, overjoyed at being asked for assistance by someone so talented.

But as soon as she took position before the pedestal, her expression shifted from joy to extreme focus. After a minute or so of staring at the bridge, she got to work, pulling levers one after another without a moment's hesitation. The corresponding pieces spun left and right incessantly, and less than a minute later, the bridge was perfectly completed. Mira and Cleos stared, dumbfounded, as a solid path stretched out to the other side of the chasm.

"Done!" She turned back to the other two with a serene smile, taking pride in a job well done.

"Indeed it is. You've got a splendid talent there!" Mira couldn't help but smile back at the honest look of joy on Hinata's face.

Chapter 19

THE SECTION ACROSS THE BRIDGE was dedicated to all things monster related. In addition to documents, records, and specimens, there were also elaborate stone statues, so lifelike that they looked like they could attack at any moment. Seeing actual living monsters prowling the shelves gave Hinata several minor heart attacks, but Mira's Dark Knights made swift work of them, easily able to tell them apart from the fakes. This gave Hinata a chance to observe their work once more while also practicing a few self-defense skills.

Mira entrusted the fighting to her knights and focused on the shelves around them. They were lined with research papers and materials harvested from monsters she'd never seen before, as well as equipment made from those materials.

"During our last survey of this area, I made copies of most of these documents," Cleos informed her. "Along with the characteristics of the monsters, they include possible battle strategies and potential usages for their dropped materials. King Solomon was quite interested."

"Oho, really now?"

Solomon was just as interested as Mira in all things related to battle. If these had caught his attention, then she *had* to know what they were. She would have to get Cleos to show her those notes when they got back.

Unlike the prior sections, the area related to the study of monsters was quite spacious. The number of statues and specimens meant larger shelves and thus better visibility. The vegetation didn't seem to be as dense here either. Mira and company followed the path laid out on the guide maps. The route was more direct than in prior areas, and they made it to the next gate faster than they expected.

Once again, the gate was sealed with iron bars. Next to the gate was a large stone slab, no doubt part of the puzzle needed to pass. However, the words carved into it were in an unknown language.

"Right, so what's the trick to this one?" Mira asked Cleos, her brow bunched

as she looked up at the block of stone.

“Our last expedition ended here,” he replied, sifting through his memories. “Past this door is unexplored terrain. It seems the writing on this tablet is in an ancient spirit language, but without anyone to decipher it, we had to turn back.”

“Hrmm, ancient spirit language, eh? Even Suleiman couldn’t read it?”

“Correct. He said it shared some similarities with the modern spirit language, but that the vast majority was indecipherable.”

Suleiman, an expert in spirit languages with vast and unparalleled stores of knowledge, hadn’t been able to make sense of it. What were *they* to do?

“So how are we supposed to—” Mira began, then cut herself off. She stroked her chin and scowled at the stone slab. “Ancient spirits, huh?”

Like other beings, the spirits of this world had their own culture and expansive history. The ancient spirit language had passed into disuse long, long ago...but it was still known by a handful of incredibly old spirits. Thus, none of her contracted spirits would speak the language...except for one.

Once inspiration struck, it didn’t take long for her to act. In a flash, she converted her Bound Arcana to the Mark of the Rosary before chanting:

Star-Eater gazing at the heavens, carrying your bow dyed the colors of the setting sun and firing lighting across the skies.

Round and round the honored seat, heroes long forgotten tumble from the heavens and fall into dreams—freed from the wheel, slumbering in the rain.

Lost between worlds, the dead sleep in Akasha’s cage and remain a distant illusion of frozen blue in vague memories.

But as stars fall we spin our own history, here and now.

[Evocation: Rainbow Spirit, Twinkle Pom]

As Mira cast the spell, her twin magic circles shifted into a riot of color and

started to spin, forming a rainbow pillar. Soon, a small girl sprang out of the iridescent light. She was dressed in an adorable little princess outfit with bouncy waves of blonde hair fluttering around her head.

“Master! Pom wants hugs!” the little girl shouted. She immediately started bouncing up and down, demanding Mira hold her.

“All right, all right. That’s a good girl.” Scooping the little girl up into her arms, Mira rocked her back and forth, gently stroking her head all the while.

“Splendid idea, Mistress Mira!” Seeing Pom’s pudgy little face squished against Mira’s chest, Cleos immediately understood her plan.

Hinata, however, was flabbergasted. Immense magical power! Copious amounts of mana spent! And all Mira got was one needy little kid? She had no way of knowing what any of this meant or how it helped.

Unbeknownst to the professor, rainbow spirits were beings that had been continuously reincarnated since the dawn of time, retaining their knowledge through each incarnation. When Mira formed the summoning contract thirty years ago, Pom had been little more than a newborn baby.

But even Mira would be the first to admit that Pom had aged slower than she expected.

“Hrmm... I wonder if she’ll be able to understand?” Mira mumbled. Pom’s smile was so pure and innocent, it was impossible to get a read on her intellect.

“Her knowledge should be innate. Why not give it a try?” Cleos suggested.

Mira nodded and then looked down at Pom, who was happily snuggling her chest. The spirit looked up, and their eyes met.

“Master, you were gone for so long!”

“I was. How have you been?”

“I’m doing well!” Pom was just a ball of cuteness, and Mira couldn’t help but smile back and rub their cheeks together, as if doting on her grandchild.



“I see. Good, good. That’s what’s most important.” Mira gently sat Pom down before the stone slab, then pointed up at it. “Now, Pom, can you read what’s written up there?”

Pom squinted at the writing for a moment, then spun back to Mira and held out her arms, asking to be picked up again. Trying to work it out, she made a series of thoughtful hums. Once she’d deciphered it, she revealed what it said:

The first half of the slab gave the instructions needed to solve the puzzle to unlock the door. To pass through, they had to turn ten of the statues to the right or left in a particular order. The second half of the slab detailed descriptions of the statues that needed turning and the direction in which to turn them. Unfortunately, the slabs did not say *where* those statues would be found.

“We should split up to look for the statues,” Mira declared.

“Right, good idea,” Cleos agreed.

The two of them summoned a few dozen Dark Knights and scattered them throughout the area. Their role wasn’t to locate the statues, but rather to dispatch any monsters that might get in the way. The horde of knights ran this way and that, destroying all the monsters they could find. Hinata watched the overwhelming assault with an envious smile.

With the extermination complete, the three got to work solving the puzzle.

“I believe the first was black, had four legs, and turned to the right. Correct?” Mira asked Pom, who was perched on her shoulders.

“That’s right!” the spirit chirped.

“All right... Then let’s split up and find it.” Mira gazed out at the innumerable statues mixed in with the shelves and specimens and heaved a sigh.

“I shall take that direction.”

“And I’ll look over there.”

Cleos and Hinata took off in separate directions. Mira watched them go, then carried herself and Pom up to a higher vantage point.

A moment or so later, Hinata's voice rang out. "I found it!" Then a second or so later: "Okay, I turned it to the right!"

"Wasn't the second one a white quadruped?" came Cleos's voice from elsewhere.

Mira checked with Pom and then yelled back, "That's the one!"

Continuing in this manner of call and response, they worked their way through the puzzle.

At first, the monster research section had tempted Mira's adventuring spirit... but the puzzle was beginning to wear on her. As she went through the statues one by one, she could feel her brainpower weakening.

"Isn't this a, you know, a panda? Panda, panda, panda, panda..."

Fox, dog, cat, bear. Mira kept up the search, tapping on the heads of the different statues as she passed. Was it Gestaltzerfall? Just plain stupefaction? Whatever it was, her cognitive abilities were vastly impaired.

"Master! That round black one turns left!" Thankfully, Pom was paying attention. Brimming with curiosity, she was on the lookout and keeping the Wise Man on track.

"Oho, that one? Well done," Mira replied, then called out to the others "Found it! Here we go!"

With a shout and a burst of effort, she turned it to the left until she heard a click and the statue stopped moving.

Slowly but surely, they continued, until Mira finally came to the last one. It had two horns like a demon and sat next to the stone instruction slab. She waited for Cleos and Hinata to join her back at the gate. Then, as the leader of the expedition, she turned the final statue. As she did, the bars sealing the gate retreated, opening the path to the next section. All three of them cheered loudly.

"Well done, Pom. You've done us a huge favor," Mira said as she prepared to dismiss the spirit.

"No!" Pom cried out, grabbing hold of Mira as sobs hitched in her throat.

Bunching her little hands in Mira's robe, she begged not to be sent away. It had been thirty years, and she was ever so lonely.

"There, there. Who's my special little girl?" Realizing the depth of Pom's feelings, Mira gently hugged her and stroked her head. The spirit's tears immediately stopped, and she donned a happy smile.

"Oh, little Pom. I know how you feel," Cleos muttered to himself, watching their familial exchange. The sadness of separation and the joy of reunion—the longing to spend more time together. He was entirely on the same page.

Huh? He knows how she feels? What? Does Master Cleos want to be... cuddled? Hinata began to form some flawed conclusions as she mulled over his whispered statement. Having learned something new about Cleos (or so she thought), she looked at the happy Pom cradled in Mira's arms and then shifted her gaze back to the elf.

"Whatever floats his boat," she quietly said to herself with a smile.

As they passed through the gate, they found themselves surrounded by greenery. The plant research materials had somehow taken root and flourished over the ages. Despite being in a jungle, the enchanted shelves stood undamaged.

"It smells so nice in here!" Pom exclaimed from above Mira's head, wiggling with delight.

"Indeed, quite nice."

At last, they'd reached their destination. Their documents resided somewhere in Section 6, repository of botanical research.

"Now, where do we start looking?"

The area seemed otherworldly, with massive trees stretching overhead and piles of shelves nestled up against their trunks. The sheer number of shelves were daunting, and many were hidden by the verdant forest.

Amid the plants, Mira caught sight of yet another guide map.

"Ugh, let's see..." Clearing away the vines, she looked at the map they'd been following this whole trip. But as she inspected this copy, she noticed it was

different—it had a breakdown of their current section.

Pulling out the list of documents Solomon had given her, she compared the titles to the sections on the guide map. Cleos noticed what she was doing and joined in.

“On Ancient Species and Divergence in Evolutionary Processes will probably be over in the history section,” he said. *“Map of Presumed Flora Distribution with Regards to Sediment and Climate Categorization* might be in the same place.”

Adelheid Report #47 was a tougher nut to crack. The title didn’t give many clues as to what the contents might be, but there was a possibility listed in the area guide. Far in the back was a set of shelves labeled “Delegate Reviews.”

“Well, that seems promising.”

“Indeed, very likely.”

They nodded to each other and then confirmed the route between the two sections.

“Well, I suppose we should split up again.” Cleos turned to Professor Hinata, who had been watching the search unfold. “Would you be willing to assist us?”

She nodded. “Of course! You’re looking for some specific documents, right?”

“Sorry to make you do my errands for me,” Mira said with a half-embarrassed smile. She hadn’t expected this trip to be such a hassle, but she was happy that she’d invited these two along.

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it,” Hinata said smiling back in earnest.

“Great. You two take the history section. I’ll venture into the back. You know the titles?”

“Completely memorized,” Cleos confirmed. “Leave it to us.”

“Yep, we’ve got this.” Hinata nodded again. They both sounded utterly confident. Then she tilted her head in consternation, asking, “But wait, isn’t everything in here protected from theft? What are we going to do about that?”

“Ah! That’s right,” Mira mumbled. She passed some of Solomon’s papers to Cleos and Hinata. “If you press this to the pages it will make a copy of the text.”

“Oh, copy paper. Okay, got it.” Hinata had evidently seen these before.
“Right. See you when we’re done.”

With that, Mira headed off deep into the jungle toward the delegate reviews.

Despite using her immortal sage arts to hasten her movement, it still took her over ten minutes to reach the area she was searching for.

“Where shall I start?”

Knowing the general area was fine, but there were still innumerable shelves to search through. Grumbling to herself, she brushed aside some vines and started looking.

“So many books!” Pom squealed, delighted.

“Yep. There sure are a lot.”

With one eye on the innocently smiling spirit, Mira made her way up a set of stairs and across a small bridge, inspecting the shelves she passed along the way.

“Hrmm! Is this it?!” After wandering through nearly half of the section, she stumbled across the paper she was after. The anti-theft system was designed to go off only when an item was taken more than ten meters from its shelf or removed for an extended period of time. As long as she stuck close and worked quickly, she’d have no issues.

Taking a seat on the ground with the document in hand, she pulled out her sheaf of papers and got to copying. First one sheet, then another, at a slow and measured pace. The process continued smoothly for around twenty or thirty sheets. Feeling neglected, Pom climbed off Mira’s back and crawled into her arms instead.

“Hey, now, I can’t work like this.” While fixing a misaligned copy, she admonished the spirit to be patient.

Pom watched intently for a little while longer, but grew bored in no time. She crawled free of Mira and began to wander around.

“Don’t stray too far!” Mira warned as Pom ran through the overgrown archive, full of childlike wonder.

“I know!” she replied, playing in some nearby vegetation.

“That’s a good girl,” Mira murmured as she got back to work.

“Phew, that’s the last of it.”

Copying completed, Mira stood and stretched. Bundling up the papers, she stuck them in her Item Box before returning the original copy to its shelf. But something was amiss.

“Hrmm?! Where’s Pom?”

While she’d been preoccupied, the spirit had vanished. Nevertheless, a summoner could sense the whereabouts of their spirits with enough focus.

“What a handful,” she said under her breath. Then she set off in search of Pom.

Mira could tell she was somewhere overhead. Not surprising, considering the shelves here were stacked high and made an impressive jungle gym. *Hrmm, doesn’t seem like she’s too far.* Evidently, Pom had elected to follow the letter of the law, if not the spirit.

“Hey, Pom!” she called out, looking up. A few moments later, Pom’s head popped into view, and she jumped down into Mira’s arms with a big smile on her face.

“Oof!” Mira groaned as she managed to catch the spirit. Then her expression froze.

“Master. Can you read this to me?” Pom beamed as she held out a book.

Mira tried to stay calm. “Pom...where did you get that?”

The spirit pointed to the top of the stacks. “Over there.”

The shelf she was pointing at was glowing red.

“Oh, no,” Mira blurted. “No, no, no, no, no.” Her eyes flicked to the ceiling.

Immediately, countless alarms blared throughout the cavernous hall, as though thousands of bells were being swung at once.

“You’re certainly a handful, kid!” Mira laughed as she hugged Pom close and got ready to push her immortal arts to the limit.

Dashing toward the history section, where Cleos and Hinata were, she dodged security golems dropping in waves from the ceiling and leapt over security barriers springing up from the ground to block her way.

“We’re flying!” Pom cried.

Mira used the thick trees and shrubs as cover and footholds as she wielded her techniques to hop and skip her way around the obstacles.

“Upsy-daisy!” She propelled them aloft using her Air Step skill. Pom giggled with delight.

Her jump took her above the forest, and she saw Garuda flying overhead.

“Mistress Mira!” Cleos shouted. He and Hinata were clinging to its back.

She waved in recognition as Garuda dived, sweeping aside the falling security golems until it swooped beneath her.

“Give me your hand!”

“Sorry about this!” Mira let herself be pulled onto Garuda’s back, and she readjusted her grip on Pom. The bird spirit’s back was surprisingly comfy.

“It’s time we make our exit. Hold on tight!” Cleos said.

Garuda picked up speed, darting toward the exit while dodging and sometimes colliding with the relentless barrage from above and below.

“Mistress Mira, what happened?” Cleos’s tone left little question as to who he suspected was behind this.

“Oh, you know...” Mira inclined her head toward Pom, who was still clutching the book in her arms.

As Cleos looked down at her, he couldn’t help but smile. “I see. Not entirely unexpected.”

They turned to skim by the giant tower of shelves that made up the center of the dungeon, but they were still only halfway out. The lower part of the room was almost entirely sealed off by the protective barriers, and countless grasping

tentacles were beginning to strike out from the ceiling.

“Eeek!” Hinata let out an involuntary shriek of panic, but neither Cleos nor Garuda let the obstacles faze them as the bird swept back and forth before finally plunging through the exit.

Garuda landed in the room of the twin guardians, and the party descended with relieved smiles.

“I lost my book!” Pom lamented from Mira’s arms, her shoulders slumped in despair. Whether she’d dropped it or some trick of the archive had called it home, the book was no doubt in the custody of a security golem and on its way back to its rightful shelf.

“At least I finished with the copies,” Mira sighed, peering back into the third level of the dungeon. The alarm was still going off, and chaos reigned. “How about you two?”

Both Cleos and Hinata happily pulled stacks of papers out of their robes.

“I finished.”

“All set!”

“Oho, good job! That means we’re done!”

Adding their copies to her own, Mira sighed in relief.

Chapter 20

THEIR MISSION COMPLETE, the three made their way back to the academy. It was well past midnight by this point, and Pom fell asleep on the walk back. Mira quietly dismissed the spirit, taking care not to wake her.

“Sorry to keep you out so late.”

“Oh, no, it reminded me of old times and was very educational.” Cleos bowed and gave a genuine smile. “I’m grateful you allowed me to accompany you.”

“Thank you as well, Hinata. Without your help, we’d still be stuck on those puzzles.”

“It was nothing. I learned a lot about summoning from watching you two. Plenty of material to add to my future lessons.” Hinata’s words were modest, but her tail happily flicked back and forth.

“Hrmm, I see. That’s good to hear.” Mira was delighted that her actions would continue to benefit future generations of summoners.

And with that, the makeshift party disbanded and returned to their normal lives. Hinata said she would spend the night in a staff room at the academy, while Cleos would retire to accommodations near the palace that were granted to visiting Elders.

As for Mira, she headed straight back to the palace.

It’s late, but I’m sure he’ll still be awake, Mira thought as she passed through the front gates. After exchanging greetings with the guards on duty, she made her way toward Solomon’s office and came across Lily.

“Ah, Lady Mira. What brings you here at this late hour?” the maid asked, determined to render aid if necessary.

Mira took a moment to respond; Lily’s sudden change in expression was somehow both reassuring and unsettling. “O-oh, just hoping to see Solomon. Is he in his office?”

“King Solomon is currently in the baths.”

“Is he now? Well, guess I was wasting my time. Thank you.” With that, Mira spun on her heel and briskly walked away.

She wasn’t sure what Lily had planned, but there was a threateningly maternal glint in the woman’s eye.

The Palace of Alcait had a large, luxurious bathing area. When Mira entered the changing room, she spotted Solomon’s royal garments, neatly folded on a shelf. That was all the evidence Mira needed, and she began to strip off her own clothes as she savored the alluring scent of the bath. What better way to relax after a long day’s work *and* conduct a post-mission debrief at the same time?

Solomon was soaking in the cloudy waters of one of the larger tubs, humming a little ditty to himself as he unwound from the day.

“I’m back!” Mira called out as she headed straight toward the fountain to take a quick shower.

“That was quick. Considering your skill with puzzles, I figured you’d be gone at least a day longer.”

He looked over and was momentarily stunned by her appearance, but he quickly laughed it off. The king climbed out of the tub and joined her in the pool surrounding the fountain.

“Yeah. You could have at least given me a heads-up about those.” She pursed her lips in a mock pout, sitting down to have a soak.

“You always hated spoilers. Didn’t want to ruin the fun.”

“Fair.” Grumbling, she let her head sink below the water.

“But that was still incredibly fast. I thought you’d still be down there racking your brain over those puzzles.”

He looked at her with wonder. Few others in the kingdom that knew Mira’s strengths and weaknesses as well as Solomon—and puzzle games were most certainly the latter.

Mira’s head popped back up above the water, and she leaned back to relax. “Well, I invited Cleos to join to help with the lighting issues...and then Hinata

said she wanted to tag along too. I figured, why not?”

“Aha! Outsourcing your adventures, are you?” Solomon chuckled and then leaned back himself.

“That Hinata? I tell you, she’s a real wizard. Well, okay, she’s a *summoner*, sure—but I mean she’s a wizard when it comes to puzzles. Took our eyes off of her for a second, and she solved the puzzle cube. And the bridge levers? Couple of minutes, tops.”

“Two minutes to solve the bridge?! Whoa...that *is* impressive.” Solomon took a moment to let it sink in. “Well, that explains how you got back tonight. So, how did it go? Did you find the documents we were after?”

“Hrmm, naturally.” Raising her left arm to show off her Control Terminal, she lost her balance and fell back under the water.

“Excellent. I was a bit worried. Sometimes, despite being in the inventory list, things are still missing.” Solomon smiled in relief as he watched Mira flounder around, trying to resurface. “I suppose I should be going, then.”

“Hold up. Let me give you the documents. Not in here, though; we don’t want them getting wet.” Standing to follow him, Mira squeezed some of the water from her hair before tying it up. Then the pair made their way back to the changing room.

Mira dried her hands with a towel, then pulled the copies from her Item Box and handed them to Solomon. “Here you go.”

Taking a moment to flip through, he nodded in approval, then dressed quickly. “These are the right ones. Thanks, and well done. I’ll get them to Suleiman first thing in the morning.”

“I wonder how long it’ll take him to crack the case?” Mira mused, pausing at the entrance to the baths. The longer it took, the more time she’d have to wander around Lunatic Lake like a tourist.

“Hmm, good question. He said probably less than a day, as long as he has the right materials to work with.” Solomon had a mischievous grin and knew exactly what Mira was getting at.

“That fast?” she muttered to herself, once again amazed by Suleiman’s efficiency.

“Well, I’m off. Have a good night.”

“Hrmm, you too.” Once he’d left, Mira returned to the baths. Stepping in, she surveyed the space before taking off in a run and doing a cannonball into the largest bath.

“It’s all mine!”

What luxury! She had the royal baths all to herself. Unable to resist, she paddled around and checked “swim in a giant bathtub” off her bucket list. After getting her fill of the forward crawl, the breaststroke, and a nice gentle back float, she was perfectly content.

Then the door opened, and in came the palace maid corps. One after another, the ladies filed in after a hard day at work.

“Ah...” Slightly embarrassed to be found floating around the bath, Mira averted her gaze. But as the maids saw her, their eyes gleamed.

While the maids’ appearance had ended Mira’s brief monopoly of the baths, she found it hard to complain during her warm, lazy soak. Her eyes flickered about this way and that.

What a delightful view!

No one was on guard or trying to hide themselves—just bare skin as far as the eye could see. A veritable smorgasbord of maid flesh on display, glistening with little droplets of water. Mira was greatly enjoying herself, chuckling internally as she compared various shapes and sizes. She shamelessly leered from her perfect disguise with no one the wiser.



“This is paradise,” she murmured contentedly, leaning back against the edge of the tub.

“Are you tired, Miss Mira?” Lily asked, suddenly popping up nearby.

“I had quite the day.” She’d been down to the deepest reaches of a dungeon and back. Tired was definitely one way to describe her current state.

“Then would you care for a massage? They’re my specialty,” Lily offered with a grin. But her eyes were those of a ravenous beast hunting its prey.

“Oho, that sounds wonderful.” Unable to see the maid’s hungry gaze, Mira let her guard drop as she relaxed in the bath. “Would you be so kind?”

“But of course.” Lily tucked her dark desires deep away and zealously gave Mira a thorough rubdown.

“Ah, that’s the spot. That feels so good.”

Lily was as adept a masseuse as she’d advertised, leaving Mira feeling as pampered as a princess. The massage was so relaxing that her eyes grew heavy, and she started to doze off a little.

“So long as we’re here, shall I continue to the...*full-body treatment*?” Lily whispered in her ear, sensing an opportunity.

“Hmmm, why not?” Mira sleepily replied, any dubious concerns having long since disappeared. “This is heaven.”

Lily’s expression went predatory once more, and the maids nearby, who had been stealing glances, made their move as well. Mira had been peeping, thinking the maids to be innocent little lambs—all the while unaware that she’d been observing a pack of wolves. Lily gently picked her up and laid her out on the massage table near the bathtub. There, the maids worked in tandem, providing a deep full-body massage, sending Mira deeper into paradise.

Completely surrendering herself to the sensations of comfort and relaxation, Mira slipped off into a deep sleep.

Chapter 21

IT WAS STILL EARLY in the morning when Mira awoke in her assigned room in the palace. She blinked and looked around. How did she get here? She tried to recall her most recent memory.

“Hrmm. I gave the documents to Solomon, then went back to the baths. And then...*utter bliss*...”

As she mentally retraced her steps, everything suddenly came back to her. She’d fallen asleep in the baths. But just as she was feeling thankful to the maids for seeing her back to her room, she noticed something.

“What? Wait, what?!”

Feeling something fluffy, she glanced down to find herself dressed head to toe in rabbit pajamas. Her massage had ended with a onesie. Evidently, the maids’ assistance last night hadn’t ended with them carrying her to her room—they’d also taken advantage of her unconscious state to force her into *this*.

There are monsters roaming the palace halls...

The maids would take any opportunity, it seemed. Mira trembled and glanced around the room to make sure none were waiting to pounce.

After quickly changing into her waiting technomancy robes—expertly cleaned and folded—she dashed off to Solomon’s office.

As she opened Solomon’s office door, the rich aroma of black tea filled her senses. The king sat at his desk, staring blankly at a mountain of paperwork with a teacup in hand.

She walked in and claimed her usual spot. “You look exhausted.”

“Don’t *you* look well-rested for a change. That’s rare.” He watched her collapse on the sofa with a huge sigh.

“Yeah, well...”

“I’m sure there’s a reason for it...and I bet I know what it is.” He’d seen the

maids coming on his way out of the baths. In fact, he might have even tipped them off. He sipped his tea with a knowing look on his face. “Would you like a cup?”

Mira took a teacup from the coffee table and dangled it his way. “Have you made any progress?” she asked.

“Suleiman pulled an all-nighter.” He filled her cup and handed it back, curling steam rising from its contents.

“He didn’t have to do that.” Mira grimaced as she took a sip. Evidently, she wouldn’t be getting as much free time as she’d hoped.

“Before I get to the news, there’s something you should see,” Solomon said, taking some papers from a drawer and laying them out before her. They were blueprints for something—and it looked humanoid.

“Huh? What’s this? A robot?”

“Close enough. We’re developing it under the name ‘Protean Doll.’”

“Hrmm... Seriously? A Protean Doll?” Mira tried out the name as she scanned the papers. Looking closer, she saw that there were actually two different sets of blueprints. The size and shape were practically the same, but the one on the right was vastly more complicated.

“Oh, right, *this* one is actually called the Stalwart Doll. Development on that was completed about five years ago.” Solomon indicated the design on the left-hand side.

“Ah, so these are two different things?”

“It was the prototype. The Stalwart Doll was an automaton created by a joint effort by the craftsmen’s guild and the technomancy engineering team. It was intended to operate in dangerous or inaccessible areas. Kind of like how robots were used back in our original world.”

Finishing his explanation, he tapped his finger on the other blueprint—the Protean Doll. “But this is what I wanted to talk about.”

“Hrmm. This one seems a bit more advanced.” Mira set her cup down on the tray next to the teapot and focused her attention on the blueprint.

“It’s based on the Stalwart Doll, but we’re modifying it to be combat capable.”

“Why? And hold on, before you answer that...what does any of this have to do with me?”

If this was all related to technomancy, then surely he was about to ask for her to refine something again. Solomon sighed and his gaze dropped.

“I’ll be frank. Development of the Protean Doll has stagnated. Just about every nation is trying to modify the Stalwart Doll into a combat-ready force. If we just focus on standard combat capabilities, we’d still be at a disadvantage because of our limited manufacturing capacity. At best, ours would just end up as a defensive line against encroaching monsters. Besides, if we accept the other countries’ versions as good enough, we’ll be limiting our potential. So, as usual, the Kingdom of Alcait has decided to add our own twist—a little *added value* to the project.”

Other nations were retrofitting their Stalwart Dolls to make them suitable for battle, using them as border patrol or reserve forces in case of emergency. Some were even developing a specialized version designed to be more effective against monsters.

“Hrmm... That does seem like the obvious next step. And this *added value* is why you’re bringing it up with me, right? You’ll be asking me to refine something or other for this project, no doubt?”

By “added value,” Mira assumed that he hoped refining could grant the automaton additional effects. But Solomon shook his head in response. “No, nothing to do with refining. However, I do need you to make a little side trip to pick up exactly what we need.”

He pulled out a list of materials—a *long* list of materials.

“This is all hush-hush. Top-level state secrets. We’re designing these Protean Dolls so that they’ll be able to use spells and techniques, and we’ve just reached the final stages. We were creating a mechanism that lets them cast spells...but the project has stalled. Thanks to Luminaria’s assistance, we’ve got some sorcery spells loaded into the Dolls, but we can’t generate the required mana. Most of these items didn’t generate any mana during testing, but a few of them did actually react.”

Solomon pointed to one item in particular: Shimmering Seedpods. These faintly glowing pods were found in various groves scattered throughout the continent. They were often used in the creation of magic tools, since they had a strong affinity for all of the various schools of magic. They were often substituted for other ingredients when supplies ran low.

“Shimmering Seedpods gave us the greatest reaction when used to generate mana. But it was still nowhere near what we needed for a practical solution.”

Mira began to connect the dots in her brain. If the Seedpods were the most promising entry on the list of tested materials, then she knew another item that might be the solution: Primordial Pips. This incredibly precious crafting material only fell from the Ancient Gopher Tree. Legend held that this was the origin of all trees throughout the world. True or not, Shimmering Seedpods that grew from modern trees could trace their ancestry back to Primordial Pips. And so long as the Pips were fresh, they could be used to create the finest tools and equipment.

Solomon had to know this as well.

“So you want me to go fetch you some Primordial Pips?” Mira took out her entry permit to the Primal Forest—one of the Devils’ Labyrinths—and tossed it on the desk.

The Primal Forest, so called due to the rampant growth of ancient plant life that blanketed the area, was coincidentally home to an Ancient Gopher Tree.

“Bingo. I figured you’d be passing by at some point and could pick some up along the way. The fact that you’re heading there next is complete coincidence.” Solomon smiled widely as he laid out yet another sheet of paper.

“Seriously, how many errands do you want me to run for you?! And where am I going this time?”

Protean Dolls aside, Mira suspected she’d be making another attempt to locate Soul Howl.

Solomon got to the point. “In order to acquire the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light, one must perform a number of incredibly difficult procedures. But the Grail isn’t a crafted item in the traditional sense; it’s more like a reward for a

long, grueling quest.”

“Oho... I’ve heard various theories regarding the Grail, but it’s actually a quest, is it?”

Back in the game, there had been a lot of debate between players regarding the Grail. The most promising theory at the time was that it was a quest reward, but the quest had never been activated in game. It would undoubtedly be more challenging than any other undertaking.

“Yes and no.” Solomon paused, choosing his words carefully. “It’s a special item that doesn’t really lend itself to any of the craftable, quest reward, drop, or harvesting categories.”

There just wasn’t really a proper way to describe the uniqueness that was the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light, as Solomon’s halting explanation clearly showed. To begin with, the Grail couldn’t be seized without following a number of steps and gathering materials in a specific order. Rather than crafting an item...it required the seeker to craft a set of *conditions*. Moreover, most of those conditions were still unknown, lost in the undeciphered portions of the text. But Suleiman believed that he had discovered the first step.

“So what’s the first condition?”

“Step one: Obtain the material needed to create the Grail’s base. It requires the root of a sacred tree that’s over three thousand years old. And the only place to find an ancient tree near where Soul Howl was conducting his research is...”

“The Elder Tree of the Forest of the Devout, just north of the Primal Forest. Right.”

“Sacred tree” was a catch-all term for any special tree that was worshipped as a deity. Through years of veneration, they came to possess divine powers. Several other three-thousand-year-old sacred trees were scattered across the continent, but with one so close to the catacombs, it was fair to assume that Soul Howl wouldn’t go too far out of his way. The closest and most familiar source was the Forest of the Devout, located to the southwest of the Kingdom of Alcait. And that was right near the Primal Forest, one of the Devils’ Labyrinths. No wonder Solomon looked so pleased with himself.

“Exactly. It’s the first stop, so no doubt Soul Howl’s already long gone, but perhaps we might find a clue. Maybe you can ask the other Elders to see what they might know. While you’re already in the area, what’s an extra little stop?”

“True enough, I suppose. If you had me go back the moment I returned, I’d be chock-full of complaints.” She reached for her teacup and took a sip of the now-cooled tea. The rich aroma helped to banish any remaining drowsiness.

“Anyway,” Solomon said, “I’m hoping you might be able to get me ten or so of the Pips, for my experiments and to have as spares.”

“I’m sorry...you want *how* many?”

Seeing as the project was still in the experimental phase, Solomon was considering the potential for failure as well as other factors. Annoyed, Mira frowned at his request. Primordial Pips were expensive and rare—back during the game, that is—and even top-ranked players couldn’t just go buying them willy-nilly. Ten of them would be worth a fortune.

“Well, with the area now off-limits, there aren’t as many people gathering them. I thought they wouldn’t be that hard to get straight from the source. If it looks like they’ll take too long to gather, just five will do.”

“Jeez... Fine, whatever. I’ll see what I can do.” Mira retrieved her entry permit from the desk and tucked it back into her Item Box. At least this would be a suitable thank-you for the technomancy robes he’d commissioned.

“Thank you. This will be a big help.” Solomon said as he placed down ten mithril coins before her. “This is your war chest for the trip. If you need anything on the road, feel free to pay with these. You can even buy a new robe for the trip.” He looked at her with a smirk. “Seeing as this is the capital, you can find replicas of all your old outfits, not just your Elder’s robes.”

“You knew and didn’t tell me?!”

“An admiring pupil imitating her legendary teacher. Simply adorable.”

“That’s not what I was going for!” she shouted as she chased him around the desk. They looked like two children at play.

Once they’d settled down, Mira plopped a heavy bag of Magic Stones onto

the table. There must have been at least a hundred of them in the small sack. “Anyway, here. I picked these up at the tower.”

“Oh, wow, thank you!” Solomon now had a cute little ribbon tied in his hair, proof that Mira had caught him at some point during their tussle. “This should keep us going for a while. Is there anything I can do in return? Anything you’ve been wanting?”

“I should be fine. Actually...” She hadn’t expected a reward, but there *was* something she had her eye on. “What about a wagon? Not like a hay wagon, I mean whatever flying wagon Cleos uses with Garuda. I could definitely go for one of those. He said your craftsmen made it?” She fondly remembered how comfortable it had been.

“A flying wagon? Hmm, all right. Small price to pay. Any particular style?”

“What are my options?”

After nearly twenty minutes of deliberation, they’d hammered out most of the details. The vehicle would be made of sturdy materials capable of withstanding the elements, and Mira explained her ideas for the interior design as best she could. There was also a lot of cutting-edge technomancy in development that she hadn’t been aware of until Solomon started making suggestions. By the end of their discussion, the final plan had become quite extravagant.

It felt like the two were planning a secret base and had gotten a bit carried away. The fact that Solomon had some practical experience designing secret bases probably contributed to the discussion going off the rails.

“This should be quite interesting.”

“Hrmm, I can’t wait.”

The two shared childlike grins. Then Mira suddenly remembered something.

“I should probably let you know this: I told Mariana and Cleos who I really am. Oh, and Lythalia knows too.”

“I see. I won’t ask why, but those three shouldn’t cause any issues. Very well.”

The ones newly in the know were Mariana, the attendant of the Tower of

Evocation; Cleos, its acting Elder; and Lythalia, Luminaria's personal attendant. They could trust these three without concern. All he asked was that she let him know about any further matters regarding Danblf, and Mira agreed.

"King Solomon, it's about time for your meeting," came a man's voice through the door.

Solomon immediately put on his regal voice and called out, "Very well." He poured himself another cup of tea and drained it, then sighed. "Never enough time. Oh, before you go—about the whole Meowmaru thing..."

"Oh? Have you learned something?"

"No, not really."

Mira frowned at him and contemplated making a rude gesture. Here she'd been concerned about the furry shikigami.

"But I did hear a rumor," he added.

Apparently, there were others besides Meowmaru that were protecting the spirits from their pursuers. Or one other, perhaps—they were acting discreetly, and it was unclear whether they were an individual or an organization. Whoever it was, it seemed they were acting in opposition to the Chimera Clausen.

"I see. And so you're saying I may have met one of them?"

"Possibly. This all comes from a few spirits my agents interviewed. Their stories were similar to yours." Solomon sulked as he cleared away the tea set. As a warrior, he was unable to speak to spirits himself. "And here, this is for you." He handed her a set of papers that had been under the tea set.

"Oho, what's this?" Mira took the bundle and began leafing through it.

"Well, you didn't have any maps yet, so I grabbed some for you to keep in your Item Box."

"Hmmm, good idea."

The bundle included nearly a dozen maps of the Kingdom of Alcait and the surrounding area. One of which was even her next destination, the Forest of the Devout.

She immediately shoved them into the special items section of her Item Box and then opened the Map command. The map projected itself above her Control Terminal like a small screen.

“Isn’t that handy.”

As Solomon cleaned up the papers spread across his desk, he repeated the words of another former player he’d heard when he was an adventurer: ““Most big cities have stores that sell maps. If you ever need one, you can find them there. You may have a rough idea of the continent’s layout, but they’re always handy on a journey.”” A gentle, nostalgic look graced his face.

He’d been a king for thirty years. His life was far from boring, but he still occasionally felt the urge to go out and explore the world again, and he always looked forward to hearing tales of adventure from other former players when they came to visit.

“Oh, and take this.” He pulled something palm-sized from his pocket and held it out to Mira. It was a stunningly designed metal disc, engraved with the Alcaitian coat of arms and the number “9” set atop the pattern of a ring.

“And what’s this?” Taking it in hand, she glanced at it and then flipped it over. On the back was engraved a magic circle. “Some magic instrument?”

Solomon shook his head. “It’s just a medal. I figured I’d give you recognition for bringing back a clue as to the whereabouts of Soul Howl. That marks you as a national VIP.” He placed his hand over the medal in her hand, saying, “In the name of Solomon, I grant this to thee.”

The medal reacted to his words, the magic circle glowing faintly.

“It’s an ethereal technique that serves as proof that I bestowed this honor upon you.”

Looking again, Mira found that the magic circle had disappeared, replaced by the name of the king.

“Hey, it worked,” he said, relieved, and then pulled back his hand.

“Thanks, but why do I need a medal?” she grumbled, flipping it back and forth. The only thing a medal was good for was to commemorate a deed

completed.

“It could be useful. It serves as a guarantee of your standing within our kingdom. Gives you a bit of clout when gathering information or attempting to gain access to certain areas when you take up missions.”

“Oho, really? I’ll make sure to put it to use.” Mira continued to toy with her medal.

“All right, then. Have a good trip. I’m looking forward to those souvenirs.”

“Hrmm, I’ll be back when I’m done.”

As he watched her walk away, silver hair swaying behind her, Solomon couldn’t help but feel a slight sense of envy. In Karanak, Mira had met a boy named Tact and formed an alliance with the guild Écarlate Carillon. He couldn’t help but imagine what new adventures she’d get up to with a new group of friends.

Maybe if I used a Vanity Case, I could...

Just as the thought crossed his mind, a voice announced that all the members for the meeting were assembled.

“On my way,” he replied, voice firm. The mood was broken, replaced with the face of a king who had been in power for thirty years.

Oh, well. Duty calls.

Tucking his bundled materials under one arm, he left the now-silent office, the ribbon on his head dancing to and fro.

Chapter 22

AFTER PARTING WAYS with Solomon, Mira checked the distance to her next destination on her new map, lost in her thoughts.

Meanwhile, Lily was watching her from behind a pillar. She'd rushed through her morning duties and camped out there, hoping to get a better view of Mira wearing her technomancy robes.

Perfect. The coat flairs out just as we planned. Gives a deliciously tantalizing view of the thighs. And the skirt sits just right—not too short, not too long. Plenty of swishing back and forth. Excellent.

So enraptured in her critique of the garments in action, she failed to notice that Mira had walked right up to her.

“What are you doing?”

As Mira stared at her quizzically, Lily straightened up and stepped out from behind the pillar. “Um... Follow-up observations?”

“Following up on what?”

“Ahem! Miss Mira, you haven't eaten breakfast yet, have you? Why don't we dine together? Then you can tell me what you think of your new robes.”

“Fine, why not? Lead the way.”

With Mira's acquiescence, Lily led the way to the maidservants' quarters.

Why are there so many people here?

Now in the maids' dining hall, Mira found herself surrounded by over a dozen female servants, all barraging her with questions.

“No problems with movement?”

“It fits properly?”

“We really focused on the texture of the lining fabric. What do you think?”

This left her with no time to enjoy her breakfast, and the sweet-smelling

French toast, piled high with an assortment of colorful fruits, sat untouched. She could just ignore them, however, and so she carefully answered each and every question. By the time breakfast was over, an hour had passed.

Mira breathed a sigh of relief as she sucked down an apple au lait. Most of the maids reluctantly headed back to their duties, leaving only Lily, who had already completed her morning rounds. The two struck up a conversation, and that gave Mira a chance to learn more about her.

Lily's younger sister was attending Alcait Academy, and her father had died during the Defense of the Three Great Kingdoms.

"By the way, I met with Acting Elder Amarette, and she took quite the fancy to these robes."

"Really?! Mistress Amarette?!" Lily beamed with joy and pressed her for more details.

Mira placed her empty bottle on the table before her. "Hrmm... Well, she wanted me to pass on that she'd like a set for herself. If that's possible."

"Of course! Mistress Amarette has always been on our list..." Lily fought to regain her composure. "Ahem! I mean, if she finds our work acceptable, then we're glad to do it!"

To Lily and her fellow maids, Amarette's unchanging expression made her difficult to approach. But now that Mira had made a proper introduction, nothing stood between the maid corps and a victory for fashion.

"Hrmm, okay, then. I'll let her know next time I see her."

"Splendid! If you could, please also inform her that we'll need to take detailed measurements of...well, everything. If she could let us know when works best for her?"

"Will do."

Mira stood up, and after thanking Lily one last time, she left the dining hall. Lily immediately scurried off to assemble a crack team of seamstresses.

Experiencing that flying wagon has kind of ruined anything else for me...

Mira was currently in a secluded plaza in front of the palace gates, a wall away from the neighboring district. She pulled out her fur coat and looked up at the sky, thinking back to the comfortable flight with Cleos.

“I’ll just have to be patient until it’s completed,” she said to herself and then affixed a summoning point.

[Evocation: Pegasus]

As she cast the spell, a blue magic circle appeared and rose into the air, raining several bolts of lightning back down onto the ground. A pure-white form stormed out among the flashes. Then the circle shattered to form wings, and the Heavenly Horse Pegasus, Herald of the Storm, landed on the cobblestones.

Folding away its wings, it whinnied softly, but the moment it met Mira’s eyes, it snubbed her and turned its head away.

“Huh?!”

While there were exceptions, the general rule was that spirits summoned without the Mark of the Rosary didn’t speak. But even without words, Pegasus was making its opinions known.

“It’s been a while. How have you been?” Mira asked, stepping closer and looking the horse in the face.

But again, Pegasus turned away and refused to meet her eye. No words were spoken, but Mira got the gist of what was going on. Pegasus was acting just like her sister had whenever she was upset.

“Are you mad at me?” The question won her a side-eyed glare. The horse’s eyes shone with loneliness and frustration. Though she may not have understood the full extent of Pegasus’s feelings, Mira could at least tell from its actions that it was definitely angry.

Poor thing... Thirty years apart was just too long.

“Look, I’m sorry. I haven’t been on this plane for decades. I know that’s a terrible excuse, but really, I only just got back,” she said. “I apologize for not

calling on you sooner.”

Right then, her small form was jolted as Pegasus headbutted her, knocking her to the ground. The horse persisted, rubbing its head against her while whinnying over and over. Mira gently held Pegasus’s head to her chest. Its eyes, dark with grief, closed shut, and a giant tear spilled out.

The sudden whiplash of emotion left Mira flustered, but she didn’t know what to do in the face of Pegasus’s sorrow. She slowly wrapped her arms around its neck and stroked its mane to comfort it. The tears soaking her chest were warm and seemed to sink down into her very heart. After a few minutes of cuddling, Mira climbed back to her feet and faced Pegasus.

“I have a favor to ask of you, if I may?”

The horse shook itself and stood, before staring her in the eyes and dipping its head in a nod.

“Thank you. I was hoping that you might let me ride you and that we could fly together.”

Pegasus’s eyes widened, and it immediately knelt before her. It prodded her waist with its nose, urging her to hurry along.

“Oho, I’ll take that as a yes! Splendid!” Delighted, Mira stroked its head and then pulled her fur coat closed as she mounted its back.

Adjusting to her weight, the steed rose back to its feet and spread its wings. Satisfied with the preflight check, it cocked its head back toward her, seeking a destination.

“All right, Pegasus. Take us that way!” Mira said, stroking its mane with one hand as she pointed off southwest, roughly in the direction of the Forest of the Devout. Pegasus whinnied in confirmation and flapped its wings, cantering across the plaza.

As the sound of hoofbeats and beating wind reached a climax, she felt her stomach flip, and then the pair were aloft. Unlike when she’d flown on Eizenfald, Mira had a clear view of the plaza thanks to Pegasus’s narrower frame.

“Excellent! And very comfortable.” The cold bite of the wind was blunted by her warm fur coat.

Pegasus seemed to be in a fine mood as it dashed through the sky. Small static bursts crackled through the air as they passed overhead, creating a stream of light behind them that was visible from the ground even in the daytime sun.

Mira wrapped her arms around Pegasus’s neck and glanced back at Lunatic Lake, which was growing smaller by the second. She could still make out the academy and the other institutions that made up Solomon’s Five Elements plan.

Where to go when next she returned? She pondered the future as she looked at the world stretching out below her in all directions.

EX:

The Great Salamander Training Regimen

ALCAIT ACADEMY was generally quiet in the early morning light. The students had yet to make their way to the academy for the first classes of the day. And yet, one person and one beast were running laps around the schoolyard.

“Just...three more laps! We can do it!”

“Gwarf.”

Ever since the dungeon crawl, Hinata and her salamander had been working hard to put Mira’s and Cleos’s advice into practice. Salamanders weren’t known for having much endurance, and they had to make up for it with agility. Unfortunately, Hinata’s fire spirit was cast from a different mold. Instead of being quick on its feet, it was stocky and sturdy—kind of like a fire-breathing tank.

But with the recommendation to focus on mobility, she had instituted a plan to train the summon’s legs, building a body that would be light on its feet. It was step one in her Great Salamander Training Regimen.

The salamander plodded around the track, heavy body swaying from side to side, flames snaking out from its mouth with every labored breath. Hinata kept pace beside it, sweat pouring down her forehead. She’d never ask a student to do something she wouldn’t do, and her salamander was a student...of sorts.

Their fitness plan consumed most of her free time, and it started with an early morning run. Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—as a professor in the Department of Evocation, she still only had a few classes to teach, giving her plenty of time to implement her plan. Gone were logic puzzles, replaced with runs and training exercises.

After the run, she had a class to teach, and then it was off to the training grounds. Thanks to Mira’s efforts, the Department of Evocation now had full access to the academy’s many facilities. Joining the summoning students who were already practicing, she picked up a wooden sword as she and her

salamander began attacking one of the many training dummies. She didn't have any clue how to use the sword, but she swung it with abandon, engaging in mock battle with her salamander.

"Okay, next let's try a jump attack!"

"Gwarf."

Being a teacher was no excuse to slack off. The students about her were inspired and motivated by her efforts, but Hinata was too focused on her own work to notice.

On her days off, Hinata and her salamander would venture into a nearby forest to practice the midair course changes they'd seen Mira's and Cleos's salamanders do in battle. But her summon was a decidedly earthbound spirit, and it kept crashing and burning over and over again. Sometimes it didn't have the strength to flip itself over, and Hinata would have to grab a branch to roll the great lizard back onto its feet. Dismissing and resummoning it would have been quicker, but she didn't have the spare mana for that, given how frequently it was happening. On the upside, she quickly became very adept at applying the principle of leverage.

"I'll pick you back up no matter how many times you fall! Let's do it again!"

"Gwarf!"

The two took off running and leapt at a tree. At first, this style of practice had resulted in numerous scratches, but now (perhaps thanks to her racial benefits) she was finding herself able to scale trees with ease.

The salamander, not so much.

The days passed. To help prospective summoners forge their first summoning contracts, Hinata and Cleos ventured off to the Ancient Yubeladius Battleground accompanied by three new students.

Cleos explained how to use the Blasting Stones, listed the benefits of the gear, and praised Mira, who had provided the materials to ensure their success. Meanwhile, Hinata patrolled the battlefield to prevent the intrusion of

unwanted adds while the students were fighting.

“All right, circle behind it and attack!”

“Gwarf!”

The results of the training were showing. Her salamander had become so agile, it could outmaneuver the armor spirits. Now the trick was learning how to use the skill in actual combat.

“Hey, we’ve got two more over here!” she called to her salamander, waving her staff to grab the wandering spirits’ aggression. “Wait, three?!”

Another spirit had suddenly appeared and joined the fray. Hinata ran across the battlefield, dodging her foes and escaping—a feat achievable thanks to the efforts of her own training.

As her salamander engaged the armor spirits and took them down one by one, she wheezed, “Practice for fighting multiple opponents...” It was a poor excuse, but it was all she could muster.

The two continued their training day after day. One evening, as Hinata was leaving the academy after completing her daily exercises, a voice called out to her from the courtyard.

“Professor Hinata, I wonder if you might like to join me for dinner tonight?”

It was Siegfried. Gone was his usual tracksuit, and for some reason, he was dressed in rather a fashionable robe. He’d been waiting outside the school building for Hinata to finish up for the day. He’d tried to invite her out to dinner dozens of times. Yet each time, she either didn’t hear him or he lost his nerve before he could seal the deal.

But today—this *very* day—she stopped and turned to look at him.

Finally, he was going to get a response! His heart thumped with joy, but he managed to keep his composure and move a little closer. He’d even found out her favorite cuisine! This plan would *not* fail!

In his eagerness, he blurted his request out all at once without pausing for breath, putting his pride on the line and hoping to steamroll any obstacles.

“You’ve been putting in a lot of extra effort lately and I was thinking you deserved to have a nice dinner and I found this lovely seafood restaurant nearby how about it my treat of course!”

“I’m so sorry, Professor Siegfried! I don’t deserve it!” Tears welled up in Hinata’s eyes as she fled across the schoolyard, trying to escape the sweet, sweet temptation. Her beloved seafood? On someone else’s tab? To her, it was like a dream come true. Any other time, she would have gladly taken him up on the offer.

But not this time. Her precious salamander was doing its best to stick to its diet, and she’d sworn off her favorite dishes in an act of solidarity. Siegfried’s invitation was like the tempting whispers of some cruel devil.

With a final anguished “Meow!” she banished the school of fish swimming through her mind and disappeared into the dusk of the city.

Siegfried was left standing there, flabbergasted, digesting his rejection. All those attempts, and the response he’d finally achieved was an apology and a hasty retreat. Where did he go wrong? Knowing nothing of her diet, he was left only to blame himself. At any other time, it would have been the perfect invitation.

As the sky turned dark, he remained in the schoolyard, blankly staring into the void.

Afterword

THE FIRST AFTERWORD was in Volume Two, and now it's time for another afterword for Volume Three. Last time, I wrote it off the cuff, but this time, I'm going to take things more seriously.

First, I'd like to express my gratitude to fuzichoco, my artist. Thank you for all of your wonderful illustrations! Also, their artbook, *The World of Gokusai Girl*, is now on sale. It includes their amazing cover art done for this series, *She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man*! I would also like to thank I-sama, the lead editor, as well as everyone else involved in the publication of Volume Three.

But more than anything, I'd like to thank all of the readers who picked up this book. It's thanks to you that I can have my daily rice. You have my sincere gratitude. Though, if possible, I'd also like to try some really fancy beef. Please help me make this dream come true!

Looks like this afterword is going to be just the one page this time. If I were rambling on like last time, I'd run out of room! Good thing I got the acknowledgments out of the way first.

...Oops, at the end already. That was fast. Well, I guess I'll see you next volume!



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